

UGC 'NET': A Critique

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ABSTRACT

UGC NET devised for the recruitment of teachers in higher education has been in the news in recent months and has faced stiff opposition, particularly from prospective researchers and teachers. A test of this kind has a very strong washback effect on all aspects of education including future teachers and their teaching. Bad recruitment testing produces bad teachers and leads to bad teaching while good testing exerts a corrective influence on bad teaching and is supportive of good teaching and good teachers. Since such a test is so important, this article looks at the sample questions of papers I, and papers II and III (concerning English Literature) of this test to examine its suitability as an eligibility test for the recruitment of teachers to see whether NET in its present form is conducive to improving the quality of teachers and their teaching so badly needed in many of our institutes of higher education.

KEYWORDS

UGC NET; Eligibility test; Recruitment of teachers.

Much has been said and reported about University Grants Commission's National Eligibility Test (UGC's NET): UGC's 'to-do or not-to-do attitude to enforcing NET; chaos and confusion created by its latest notification; shortage of net-cleared candidates in subjects like English, Economics and Computer Science; and professors complaining that very good students of theirs fail the test. Some have questioned UGC's rationale for two different tests, NET, and State Level

Eligibility Test (SLET); some have questioned its right to impose a national test on universities undermining their autonomy; and teachers' and researcher bodies are sore over its decision to implement the revised conditions retrospectively. Some candidates, including some academics, have termed it "irrelevant", but I have not seen any

reasoned critical analysis and discussion of the NET to judge its suitability or otherwise for the stated purpose even though pre-service testing of this kind has far-reaching implications for teacher development and teaching-learning scenario. Hence, this article aims to examine the merits of the NET in its present form. This becomes imperative not only to judge its suitability for the recruitment of teachers in higher education but also for examining the validity of similar tests introduced for admission to the Ph.D. programme as well.

NET comprises three papers; the paper I am a general paper on teaching, research, and general awareness, and papers II and III are subject-specific.

Let us look at some of the sample questions in paper I. (For want of space only one example from each unit is taken here):

I. Teaching Aptitude

1. Which one of the following is the main objective of teaching?

- (A) To give information related to the subject.
- (B) To develop the thinking power of students.
- (C) To dictate notes to students.
- (D) To prepare students to pass the examination.

Key: (B)

II. Research Aptitude

1. A researcher is generally expected to:

- (A) Study the existing literature in a field
- (B) Generate new principles and theories
- (C) Synthesize the ideas given by others
- (D) Evaluate the findings of a study.

Key: (B)

IV. Communication

1. Informal communication network within an organization is known as

- (A) Interpersonal communication
- (B) Intrapersonal Communication
- (C) Mass Communication
- (D) Grapevine Communication

Key: (D)

VIII. Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

1. ICT stands for

- (A) Information common technology
- (B) Information and communication technology
- (C) Information and computer technology
- (D) Interconnected technology.

Key: (B)

IX. People and Environment

1. In which part of India water is affected by arsenic contamination?

- (A) Haryana
- (B) Andhra Pradesh
- (C) Sikkim
- (D) West Bengal

Key: (D)

X. Higher Education System: Governance, Policy, and Administration

1. Which one of the following is not considered a part of technical education in India:

- (A) Medical
- (B) Management
- (C) Pharmaceutical
- (D) Aeronautical

Key: (A)

If we ponder over these questions and others in this paper, we find that these questions are devised to test 'memory'. It is a misnomer to call titles I and II given above 'Teaching Aptitude' and 'Research Aptitude' as these, too, are geared to testing only memory. Paper I is popularly nick-named 'memory-based' test as 60 percent of the questions test only that while the rest 40 percent relate to areas that examinees protest has little relevance to their field of study or research. What these questions test is 'knowledge' and not 'application of knowledge'; awareness of theory but not the application of theory. As we all know 'knowledge' alone is not enough; what is required is the application of knowledge and/or change in attitude.

Papers II and III of NET are subject-specific but even this fare no better. In considering the questions in these two papers, I will confine my discussion here to my subject, English. Let us first have a look at some of the sample questions in paper II: Sample Questions

1. Sissy Jupes is a character in

- (A) Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
- (B) Dicken's Hard Times
- (C) Dicken's Christmas Carols
- (D) George Eliot's Middlemarch

2. Which of the following arrangements of English poems is in the correct chronological sequence?

- (A) Lapis Lazuli - L'Allegro - Lamia - Thyrsis
- (B) Lamia - Lapis Lazuli - Thyrsis - L'Allegro
- (C) L'Allegro - Lamia - Thyrsis - Lapis Lazuli

(D) Thyrsis - Lamia - L'Allegro - Lapis Lazuli

3. The words "beaded bubbles winking at the brim" occurs (sic) in

(A) Ozymandias

(B) Ode to a Nightingale

(C) Hero and Leander

(D) Dejection - An Ode

One wonders how such tests of 'memory' are going to help one become a good and competent teacher of English Language or Literature.

Sample questions from paper III are no better than those set at post-graduate examinations of our universities and therefore suffer from the same maladies as so often pointed out by examination reformers.

PAPER - III(A)

1. Write an illustrative note on Elizabethan Lyric.

OR

Write a note on the Romantic Poets' use of symbols.

2. Describe the sources of Eliot's allusions in The Wasteland.

OR

Examine Aristotle's concept of truth in literature.

PAPER III (B)

1. Describe and discuss the elements of anxiety and nostalgia in the poetry of the 'Great Moderns'.

OR

Postmodernism celebrates the fragmentation of master narratives- Discuss.

There are many drawbacks to these types of testing. The major charge is that these test 'content' and not 'skills', 'product' and not 'process', and hence lead to all those ills that emanate from this kind of testing: guessing important questions, mugging up answers to these from bazaar notes and dependence on luck or chance - that is if you are lucky to get in examination

the questions you have prepared and mugged up, you come out successful with flying colours. Moreover, as the NET syllabus in English does not specify which texts are for detailed and which for non-detailed study, as the examination in the civil services does, the examiner is free to set detailed-study questions from any texts spanning a period of 400+ years of British Literature. Hence, this increases the role played by these elements: guesswork, memory, chance, and luck.

From our discussion of the NET subject-specific papers II and III in English, we find that these are based on a testing technique that is obsolete now and, hence, suffers from all the ills that plague much of our teaching and testing so often written about in academic journals by those seeking academic reforms. This kind of test will produce teachers who, once they pass the test and get appointments, will simply perpetuate this traditional but obsolete system of teaching and testing.

Our discussion reveals that all the three papers of the NET in its present form seek to test 'memory' or 'theoretical knowledge' although through varied question types such as multiple choice requiring very short answers, short answers, and finally essay-type questions. However, varying the question forms does not change what these papers aim at doing - testing memory and rote learning.

From our analysis so far, we find that NET in its present form is based on the view of testing, and hence of teacher and teaching, that was prevalent half a century ago and has since been discarded the world over though it has continued to exist in India. Teaching and testing of 'content' or theoretical knowledge and rote-learning can be forgiven at the Master's Degree level but UGC NET ought to go beyond this if the aim is to encourage the production and recruitment of competent teachers in higher education.

This technique of testing that was so popular once has been castigated by

reformers. Rote-learning, it is pointed out, does not result in cognitive development; it rather suppresses thinking and retards personal development and growth but, despite its irrelevance, this technique has persisted at all levels of our teaching and testing mainly because these questions are easy to set and easier to score. Outside the education system, some of our TV quiz programmes have also kept the technique alive and turned many school kids and even adults into rote learners of the highest degree.

Testing has a very strong backwash effect on all aspects of the teaching-learning situation. Bad recruitment-eligibility testing leads to bad pre-service preparation and produces bad teachers while good testing exerts a corrective influence on bad teaching and is supportive of good teaching and good teachers. The NET in its present form cannot exert a corrective influence on our teachers and their teaching.

Since testing has a very strong backwash effect on all aspects of education, including teachers and their teaching, it can be fruitfully used as a means of producing good teachers and good teaching. A NET can be devised to achieve what our universities may not want to do as not all those enrolled in PG courses are likely to choose teaching as a profession unlike those who take the NET.

A direction for change can be worked out from the qualities of a good teacher and good teaching but the NET in its present form does not seem to be based on these traits. The entire NET exercise in its

present form seems to emanate from UGC's misplaced idea of what a good teacher is. UGC's idea of a competent teacher can be derived from one of its sample questions from the NET paper I reproduced below:

The effectiveness of teaching depends on

(A) Qualification of teacher

(B) Personality of teacher

(C) Handwriting of teacher

(D) Subject understanding of teacher.

(Answer key D)

How many teacher-educators would agree to this definition of 'effectiveness of teaching' and by implication of an 'effective teacher'? In this age of 'knowledge explosion', can one ever claim full "subject understanding" in any field of study? If it were so, the idea of 'life-long learning' would have little meaning. In this age of information technology, modern teacher-educators do not visualize a competent teacher as a 'provider of knowledge' but a 'facilitator of learning'. This shift in our perspective of the role of a competent teacher has brought about drastic changes in other aspects of teaching-learning situations – the nature and role of learners, learning-teaching materials, classroom practices, testing and evaluation, and so on. The qualities of a good teacher and good teaching have been well researched, identified, and documented by teacher educators and a good national eligibility test for recruitment of teachers in higher education that seeks to inculcate these traits ought to be evolved and implemented.

WORK CITED

www.ugc.ac.in For NET syllabus and sample questions for June 2010 exam.