an end-to-end guide on online

entrance exams

welcome to brighter

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Introduction

"India's top 100 universities will be permitted to automatically start online courses by May 30, 2020," while announcing the details of the Atmanirbhar Bharat Package (Self-Reliant India package) recently

Nirmala Sitharaman
Minister of Finance and Corporate Affairs, GOI

This transition to the online mode, amid the pandemic, indicates a sweeping change in the offing, in the broader education ecosystem. Online education, however, is only a part of that ecosystem. The shift to the online platform is now not restricted to classroom teaching and is steadily involving to include entrance exams. The continuity in online exams and e-assessments are equally critical to ensure educational continuity amid the present and unforeseen future disruptions.

Testing an individual's skill and knowledge through entrance examinations has been a benchmark of quality higher education for several historical and institutional reasons. Admission into any stream or program is preceded by a national, state, or university level entrance exam. One has to showcase all-round prowess in entrance exams, such as AIEEE, MAT, GMAT, TOEFL, CAT, GATE, CLAT, XAT, SAT, ACT, AP, to find a college of choice for studying diverse career disciplines.

It is a significant undertaking involving eligibility criteria, syllabus, and much more. Entrance exams also lend transparency to the admission process by providing a common yardstick to measure all applicants' potential against a standardized set of skills required by an institution's program. It assuages concerns around quality and provides institutions a first-hand insight into the future-ready workforce.

So, how are these entrance exams conducted?

The well-accepted process has been conducting exams at testing centers, either on computers or the traditional pen & paper method. However, the process has been disrupted, globally, because of the health emergency caused by COVID-19. Much uncertainty about the current situation has left colleges and universities to grapple with the challenge of continuity without costing students their valuable academic year. Also, the postponement of any entrance exam is bound to have a long-term impact on education sustainability and continuity globally.

28
March

A leading English daily, The Indian Express reported that over 45 lakh students preparing for major competitive exams in India had been stranded as the lockdown impacted the academic calendar. And 777,000 students scheduled to take the SAT abroad were unable to do so because of the pandemic and the consequent closure.

The distinction between offline and online entrance exams is blurring fast due to technology and easy access to the internet. Leveraging technical advancements and their proliferation can enable institutes to conduct online entrance exams and tide over the on-ground situation. It ensures continuity in education, examination processes, and schedules and helps colleges and institutions achieve greater scalability when conducting large-scale, high-stakes exams for multiple candidates, at different locations, simultaneously. Its additional advantages of safeguarding applicants and invigilators from any possible health complications are equally noteworthy.

Did you know:

- **Cambridge Assessment, with its global network of centers spanning 150 countries, is now offering its assessments via remote invigilation.**

- The College Board in the United States has announced that the **SAT college entrance exam will be offered to all students online, should school and testing locations remain closed for the fall semester.**

- Even Advance Placement **(AP) Exams will be taken from home this year.**

- **ETS has expanded the availability of the TOEFL iBT with a Special Home Edition.**

- AIMA- The national apex body of the management profession in India, has introduced **Remote Proctored Internet-Based Mode (IBT) for MAT.**

- **LSATs, NIPER JEE 2020, APPECET 2020,** and many other prominent entrance exams are also being administered online this year.

- Private entrances like **Symbios's SET and Christ Universities' CUET** are also moving to the online platform.

While a few prestigious setups are already ahead of the curve, the ability to go 'online' with entrance exams is a work in progress for most educational entities. The change may be imminent, but a sudden switch to an unfamiliar landscape seems to be a daunting proposition. Numerous issues around accessibility, credibility, scalability, technical adaptability and exam experience deter educators from choosing the online entrance examination as a viable option.

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Specific Challenges Deterring Universities/ Institutes from Migrating to the Online Platform Include

A Conservative Mindset

Our experienced educationists and academicians prefer the traditional exam-taking process as it is a tried and tested method. Their preference is also shaped by the fact that they've never conducted a large-scale exam online, and perceive them as challenging and unviable.
It is difficult for them to comprehend the full potential of technology. As a result, they're unable to establish it as a universal plan unless their prerequisites are met convincingly.

Scalability

Entrance exams are the catalyst for a student's bright future. With *more than 2 million students taking the SAT in 2018 and the Management Aptitude Test 2020 PBT exam witnessing more than 19,000 candidates,* these exams are conducted on a large-scale and continue to grow. Therefore, they require a robust system that complements their value and stakes. Additionally, it must also address the diverse needs of the candidates, teachers and universities alike.

Quality-Control Issues

It is a difficult task for many to find software that would enable the functioning of an online entrance examination system effectively and efficiently.

A gamut of platforms on the market has complicated the onerous task of choosing a quality platform with no margin for a flaw or error. It has further restricted the spread of the online medium as a viable option.

Integrity at Stake

The integrity of the exam is paramount for institutions of higher education. *Cath Ellis, Associate Dean of education at UNSW Sydney, told the Times Higher Education that online exams should not compromise academic integrity.* After all, even one misconduct can tarnish the reputation, painstakingly built over time.

That online entrance exams compromise academic integrity is an unfounded notion. It is presumed that the likelihood of academic dishonesty would be high, with no oversight on the exam-taker. It, therefore, creates concern about whether the most deserving students are getting admissions.

Accessibility

Ensuring easy access to test-takers, irrespective of their geographical location is the foremost challenge in giving an online entrance test for institutes. Test-takers are often from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and don't have similar levels of access to technology and the internet. Broadband connectivity still eludes several rural areas and test-takers often rely on low-speed data connectivity. Therefore, they must be able to access the platform with minimum internet bandwidth and take the test in a hassle-free manner.

Concerns About Data Privacy

Protecting the sensitive details of an applicant and one's voluminous data is critical for universities today. In 2019, various institutions witnessed sophisticated cyber-attacks for which they were utterly unprepared. Such instances create trust issues among educationists, especially when third-parties are involved in conducting exams. Institutes believe they have no way of knowing who has unauthorized access to their data and how it may be used/misused -- coupled with the complexity of networks today, and a lack of adherence to security protocols by many service providers, further compounds the mistrust. Unfortunately, this creates a hidden barrier to moving to the online mode for entrance exams.

The Lack of Customization

The lack of customized offerings creates a hindrance, even if an academician plans to give online examinations. The inflexibility in accommodating special requests, such as slotting accessibility, hiring of personal proctors to invigilate the exams, tailor-made grading criteria, or forming specific guidelines for virtual examination, rather than following a standardized template shell, staggers the possibility. The 'one-size-fits-all' approach doesn't work well with educationists.

Some significant challenges hinder institutes and universities and many senior faculty members from transitioning to an online exam process. They perceive online exams as an additional challenge to the already comprehensive exam-giving process.

Challenges Deterring Academicians Include

Technical Adaptability & Operational Complexities

While Millenials and Gen Z are transforming the future with technology, there is a visible technical gap between Gen X, baby boomers and others. The platforms and software created today are not designed considering everybody's technological adaptability. It is honestly a myth that older and higher-ranking faculty members exhibit the least support for online education. They wish to try, even if they aren't digital natives. If, however, they are scrambling to understand its intricacies, it'll only make them anxious. As a result, they aren't confident and comfortable applying it, which creates resistance in embracing it.

A great tool is one that does not require too much training.

P D Jose
Professor Corp. Strategy & Policy
IIM Bangalore

The Format Flexibility of Question Papers

Faculty members spend precious hours creating question banks and formats to test the capabilities of an applicant. It spreads across MCQs, objective questions, lengthy essay-type questions, skills-based questions, simulation questions and personality tests. No exam has a standardized format or a simple set of guidelines and varies depending on the type of test. The template and structure vary greatly, which is why the faculties need the flexibility to organize things their way. But the absence of a platform meeting all and sundry user requirements creates a roadblock.

Significant Challenges Faced by Applicants

Accessibility

A lack of awareness regarding the location-agnostic, minimal internet bandwidth feature of online exams is hindering the shift to online exams. Even though current internet-based exams are designed to be accessible to every applicant, even at the remotest corners. Online entrance exams seem to be a distant possibility for applicants as they perceive accessibility and connectivity as a hassle and the costs involved to be steep.

The Exam-Taking Experience

While many of us may have adjusted to the new normal of taking online instructions, the process of online exams for many students can be unique. While it is difficult to say that there will be a disparity or digital divide, anxiety is common. Numerous questions around time management, the unease of being invigilated remotely, homely distractions, difficulty in navigation, concern them immensely. If an online examination software does not replicate and create real-life exam experience to retain the traditional look and feel of an exam for the applicant, it will not be taken ahead by the institute.

Technological progress seems to have found a solution in a sophisticated virtual platform that serves the needs of institutes and students alike, without compromising on their safety and well-being.

> *Here is Mercer | Mettl's Examine, an Online Examination Software System is an eclectic combination of location-agnostic, robust anti-cheating features, AI-proctored supervision, human proctoring flexibility, and stand-alone services, that enable universities and institutes to conduct extremely secure online examinations with high integrity.*

What Makes Mercer | Mettl's Offerings Unique

Mercer | Mettl has acquired a pole-position in the assessment ecosystem, enabling numerous clients across industries and verticals to conduct their examinations and assessments with the highest industry standards. The company's clientele list includes major global and Indian institutions, corporations, and startups. Mercer | Mettl has partnered with some of the most renowned education institutes, such as IIM Bangalore and Christ University, among others, in the higher education domain. The company's sphere of engagement continues to expand to include newer institutes and universities, offering diverse academic courses.

Scalability

Mercer | Mettl's online platform, to date, has conducted more than 20 million online tests, and the numbers continue to grow. The robust technology has a proven track record of delivering results at all levels. Most recently, it accomplished a noteworthy feat of conducting over one lakh proctored assessments in a day, along with hosting multiple universities and students simultaneously. Our impressive load testing data further shows our volume proficiency- In a 60-minute time slot, we've successfully hosted a pool of 1000 candidates joining in at the same time, every minute of the hour.

Credibility

Academic integrity during high-stakes exams holds supreme importance. Hence, our cheating prediction abilities are as high as 95%. Our state-of-the-art proctoring technologies, combined with the latest advances in AI-based and remote live proctoring, eliminate a myriad of unsavory instances associated with online entrance exams. A stellar combination of AI flags, human proctoring ability, and applicants' authentication ensure accurate cheating detection.

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40,000 students have successfully given the Christ University Entrance Exams online using our platform without a glitch. In the past, Mercer | Mettl has aided IIMB to scale the exams of its digital courses beyond the traditional realm by managing 1.2 million learners spread across 190 countries.

Validations from Top Universities

Our prestigious academic partnerships validate the credibility and proficiency of Mercer | Mettl's services. Institutes like Cambridge Assessment, Christ University-Bangalore, Disha, IIM Bangalore, SP Jain, ISB, XLRI, to name a few, have already replaced traditional examinations with our online examination system to maintain their academic calendar and schedule. Most recently, Mercer | Mettl has partnered with AIMA to conduct MAT online exams across India to ensure the continuity and sustainability of their exam process.

Customized Propositions

Our dedicated development team provides customized options to our clientele to ensure maximum optimization of resources at hand. For instance, we enabled Christ University, Bangalore, to scale their entrance exams by scheduling 40000 students over multiple slots spread across three days for the exams. This built confidence as we overcame their primary concern instantaneously.

Similarly, IIMB was looking to extend the student's exam-taking ability from their existing legacy Learning management system (LMS) IIMBX. We added Mettl's Proctoring as a Service (MPaaS) - a remote invigilation security layer - to their LMS with ease.

Timely Deliveries

From a seamless integration in two days to training sizable faculty members in proctoring in three days, our team is adept at addressing priorities and solving the most pressing challenges within a tight deadline. We understand the precise nature of requirements to make informed decisions and are mindful of urgent requirements. The synergy between our tech, delivery, and product teams also drives transparency and timely delivery.

> *Mercer | Mettl's technical team integrated the Online Examination Platform with IFIM Business School, Bangalore's, system in just two days. Within those two days, the team also trained the academicians on various aspects of the platform's functionality.*

Adherence to Security Norms

Data breach, unauthorized access, and privacy risk are global concerns. Such issues prompt a focused approach to strengthening data privacy. Mercer | Mettl follows a stringent security protocol to safeguard both candidates' and clients' data. We are hosted on a highly secure cloud platform for storage and computation (Amazon Web Services). We use HTTPS (256 bit SSL encryption) for secure data transmission while ensuring webcam proctored tests to run without the need for software download. Our management ensures the safety and encryption of all data available with us. Additionally, At Mercer | Mettl, the safety and security of our system and services are of utmost priority. Therefore, we have various established processes to ensure every micro and macro functionality of our service is fine-tuned and optimized seamlessly.

A Robust, User-Friendly Online Platform

With Mercer | Mettl's- Examine: Online Examination Software System, universities can securely conduct high-stakes exams in a cost-effective, scalable, and credible manner.

1. This end-to-end exam management platform encompasses test creation to real-time reporting, complete with a dedicated admin dashboard for detailed analytics and log and video recording.

2. The platform offers a rich repository of 26 different formats for exam papers, considering distinct exam patterns and user requirements of the academia. (It includes knowledge-based, application-based questions and even complex formula writing.)

3. The robustness supports multiple exam-takers at various locations, across the globe, with bandwidth as low as 512kbps.

4. A User-friendly, easy-to-navigate interface ensures hands-on expertise for even the most senior-most faculty, without any prior technical knowledge.

State-Of-The-Art Anti-Cheating Features

Universities and colleges can supervise students even at the remotest of locations by proctoring them from their distantly-located centers. A proctored online entrance exam provides similar levels of accountability as an in-person class for students, as invigilation is possible via an AI-based algorithm or an AI-assisted human proctor. This means professors will be assisted by our AI algorithm to invigilate their class's credibility. Mercer | Mettl's proctoring technologies lend fairness, ethics and progressiveness to internet-based exams by negating any possibility of malpractice during an online proctored exam.

Some distinct features include:

AI Proctoring

Mercer | Mettl's futuristic AI algorithm is trained with more than 2.8 million proctored assessments. It can detect up to 18 dynamic digressions with over 95% accuracy. The intelligent algorithm is configured to flag a variety of suspicious cases, such as the non-visibility of face/ presence, detection of mobile phone, presence of an additional person, a distracted eye movement, etc. AI proctoring eliminates the most glaring vulnerabilities with a dynamic set of anti-cheating features.

3-Point Candidate Authentication

There are a growing number of cases of impersonation by students globally. It raises valid concerns among examiners on the real identity of the exam-taker. MPaas' 3-point candidate authentication ensures the utmost reliability and authenticity of the candidate. Live authentication begins after the candidate clicks on the exam link. The webcam will first ask students to click their photo and show their ID proof. They are also needed to send across customizable registration details. Our proctors are available around the clock to verify the photo ID against registration details and attest to the candidate's legitimacy.

Manual+Live Invigilation

Sharing the screen, video and audio is a prerequisite for taking the exams. With one-to-one and one-to-many proctoring features, live proctoring provides a classroom view to the human invigilator monitoring remotely, from start to finish. An added feature of pausing / stopping /resuming the test in real-time with a live chat option enables the invigilator to interact with students to allay any suspicion or query. This entire recorded session can be viewed later using the proctoring software.

MSB

Mettl Secure Browser (MSB) is another attribute of our proctoring technology. A secure browsing feature allows academicians to host the online entrance exam in a safe environment without worrying about on-screen cheating. From enabling browser lockdown functions, allowing minimum navigation control, to blocking all external ports - MSB restricts access to any and every unauthorized resource possible. This feature goes a long way in preventing the candidate from surfing the web for answers using the internet.

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Credibility Index

Mercer | Mettl's proprietary algorithm 'the Credibility Index' is an excellent predictor providing the most relevant results to administrators. An auto-generated report highlights the applicant's integrity score for a proctored session. With valuations such as high, medium, and low, examiners can swiftly identify and filter out candidates who may have resorted to cheating. Insights from AI flags record details of the proctoring sessions, and test finish status forms the basis of the analysis. This guarantees authenticity and ensures only the most deserving students get admission.
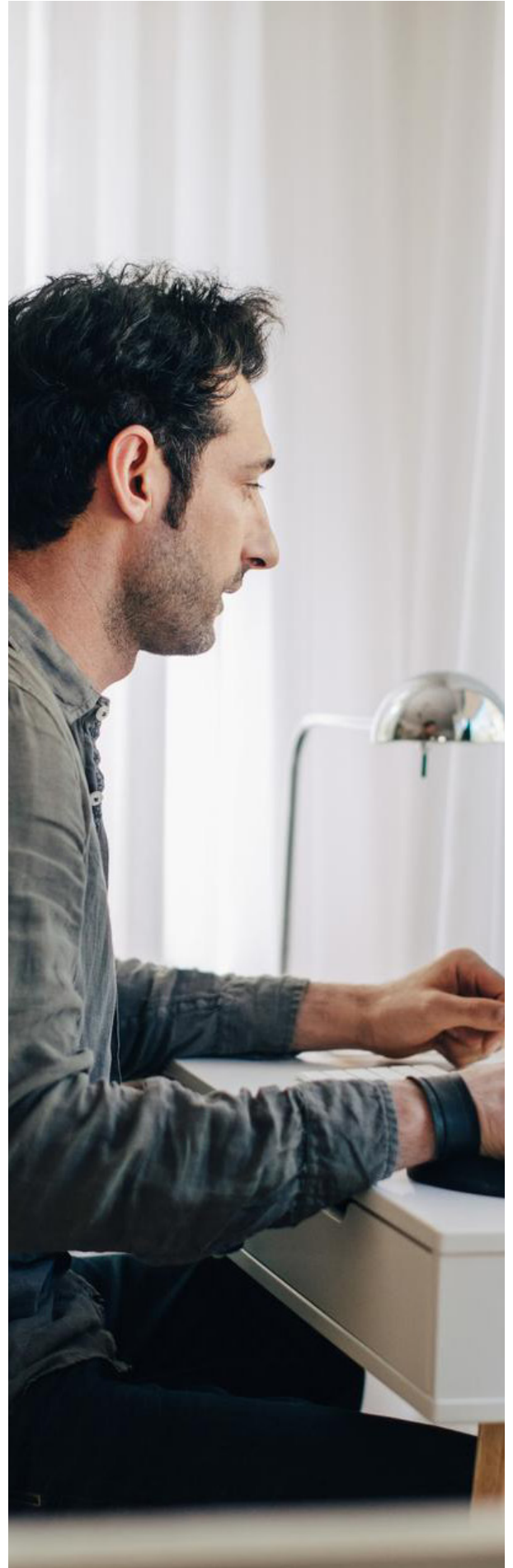
RTI Compliant

To showcase complete transparency associated with both administering and grading of MAT, Mercer | Mettl had become RTI compliant. They aim to empower the academia and the applicants to navigate through the process without any ambiguity.

The Provision for Paid Demo Tests for Candidates

Mercer | Mettl has provided first-time online test-takers for MAT, the provision of trying out a proctoring enabled paid demo test. Even though the platform ensures no change in the experience for exam-takers, demo tests help gain familiarity and build confidence while using the system when taking the actual test. There is no limit to the number of times one can take these 10-minute tests to get accustomed to the online exam process. Therefore, students and even faculty members can practice their test-taking strategies.

We can no longer presume that this disruption is just a minor blip. It is expected to have longer-term consequences in shaping the future of the entrance exam ecosystem. These disruptions would recur in newer forms.

We often forget that the entrance exam is a critical fabric tying the entire higher-education ecosystem together. We need to forge new ground and deploy our expertise with some changes. The lack of preparedness will have a long-lasting impact on the education system.

"We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand," meaning we must leverage what we have instead of complaining about the situation.

Randy Pausch
American educator

Technology allows us to move the entrance exam system online with location-agnostic, secure, reliable, agile and logistically hassle-free features. We can tide over any disruption in the present and future if we utilize it optimally.

About Us

At Mercer I Mettl, our mission is to enable organizations to make better people decisions by making credible people decisions across two key areas: Acquisition and Development. Since our inception in 2010, we have partnered with 2900+ corporates, 31 sector skill councils/ government departments, and 15+ educational institutions across 90+ countries.

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