

It's a problem CAT

Technical glitches apart, there was no level playing field, complain many students

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Anup Bali, a resident of Bangalore, has been preparing for the Common Admission Test (CAT) — for admission to one of the Indian Institutes of Management — for the past 12 months and was confident he would be able to give it his best shot. But when he reached the centre, he was told that his exam was rescheduled due to 'technical glitches.' He was assured that a new date for the exam would be communicated to him. For the next 10 days, Anup frantically called Prometric's helpline and even the IIMs but did not receive any concrete dates. Till date he has only an announcement, that a re-test would be conducted, to fall back on.

Sounds like a nightmare? This is just one among hundreds of instances in Bangalore alone where exams were cancelled in two test centres. Process delays, non-working biometric systems and passwords, common passwords, repeated and non-visible questions, repeated answer options, malfunctioning computers and features (review buttons, timers etc.), missing graphs & charts, screens going blank in the middle of the exam and computers rebooting are some of the problems which IIM aspirants faced this year.

From the statistics it would appear that at least a few prospective applicants had a premonition of the chaos that may occur when an exam changes format. CAT 2009 actually saw a decline, for the first time in 12 years, in the number of applicants.

A total of 2.41 lakh applicants took the CAT this year, a 1.8 per cent decline from the 2.46 lakh who took the exam last year. The uncertainties of the online format and the apprehension of poor placement opportunities in view of the economic slowdown are some of the reasons cited for the decline in numbers.

One prominent complaint that surfaced amongst the fortunate students who were able to appear



TENSION: Scene at a CAT centre. — PHOTO: K. MURALI KUMAR

for the exam this year was that the questions were repeated from previous slots as well as from old CAT papers, giving an unfair advantage for those who wrote the exam later. "If coaching institutes can give us 30-odd mock tests without repeating a single question, why can't Prometric and the IIMs do so?" asks Nivedita Jain who took CAT this year.

Questions were also discussed and listed out in forums on social networking sites such as Orkut. Even knowing five questions beforehand can make a dramatic impact on the performance in the test as this means knowing the answers to roughly 10 per cent of the test.

"If cunning and shrewdness in getting questions from previous test slots, through friends and forums, are the only eligibility for getting into an IIM, I am clearly not cut out for it" says Hari, an IIM aspirant.

Distractions

According to Prometric, more than 2.15 lakh candidates successfully completed their exams. However this does not necessarily mean that they were provided a level playing field. As many students across various centres faced problems and invigilators were constantly talking to each other and to Prometric's helpline on the phone, the constant disturbance obviously had its impact on the performance of students. The distraction and

lack of preparation of the invigilators for the nature of the test also led to rampant malpractices, according to B. Sai Kumar, Course Director for CAT, T.I.M.E., Hyderabad.

Jaideep Singh Chowdhary, spokesperson for T.I.M.E., asked: "How can it be fair if thousands of students get three-four more weeks to prepare for the exam while the others who 'successfully' completed the exam had to do so under stressful conditions?"

The IIMs and Prometric have so far been focusing on ensuring that all students get a fair chance. Director of IIMB, Pankaj Chandra, said: "We would like to assure all concerned that the outcome of the process would be fair to all candidates." The IIMs have said that all students who could not take the CAT for various reasons will be given another opportunity to take the test in the computerised format. Prometric is reported to be using test centre staff reports, student complaints and technology (including audio & video records of the centre and electronic records of candidates) to identify affected candidates.

The IIMs have stated in the past that the paper-pencil format was straining their infrastructure and that it would cost less to move on to the computerised format.

Prometric won a five-year contract worth about Rs. 180 crore from the Ministry of Human Re-

source Development. Prometric outsourced the aspects of invigilation and infrastructure to NIIT in a contract worth Rs. 50-55 crore. The infrastructure for the exam was provided by NIIT, hiring the facilities of over 200 private engineering colleges across the country.

CAT 2009 is not the only online exam in the recent past to be hit by problems. IGNOU's first online entrance exam conducted with the help of service provider Yahoo had to be rescheduled when the server crashed in November this year.

However, a quick look at Prometric's website will show that it has been conducting exams for nearly two decades across 160 countries including the popular SAT, GRE and TOEFL. Yet, Prometric's parent company, ETS, lost a five-year contract in August 2008 when the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, U.K., blamed ETS Europe for problems with the administration of tests.

So far, the only explanation which has been provided by the IIMs and Prometric has been a virus attack. "Computer viruses at a number of testing centres prevented over 2,000 candidates from taking the exams," states a press note released by Prometric and IIMs on November 29. No further explanation has been provided about the nature of the virus or how it managed to attack over 50 different testing labs when they were not interconnected. "Prometric is covering up for its lack of preparation for the scale of the exam by blaming a mysterious virus" said Mr. Jaideep Singh Chowdhary.

The IIMs have apologised to the candidates and their parents for the problems faced by them. This included a public apology by Satish Deodhar, convener of CAT from IIM-Ahmedabad, and an e-mail sent to all the candidates by Prometric which said "We understand that some of you may have had a less-than-satisfactory experience and we apologise."

As the IIM admissions committee meets to decide what is to be done, an analysis of why it all went wrong will be conducted. The only other time there was a problem with conducting the CAT was in 2004 when a question paper leak prompted the IIMs to re-conduct the exam. Students are hoping that history will repeat itself and the IIMs will give a fair chance to all students again this year.