

Online CAT: Fewer glitches on day-3

8K Candidates Stand To Lose Out; Organisers Seek To Play Down Mistakes

Our Bureau
AHMEDABAD

AFTER three of days of chaos that saw more than 8,000 of 75,000 candidates being denied the career-defining Common Admission Test (CAT), the test organisers admitted to the failure but refrained from giving an assurance of smooth conduct of the test that has seven more days to go.

"We have increased the degree of virus protection and access systems across labs has improved... We expect the number of affected labs to come down tomorrow," the organisers said. With rising anxiety among the students, the top brass of Prometric, the US-based testing agency that bagged the multi-million dollar contract to conduct the test, flew down to Ahmedabad to address a media conference along with the IIM-A officials.

On the third day, CAT remained a relatively smooth affair but computer glitches such as blank screens and prolonged time for downloading the test paper continued. The test changed its format for the first time in its 33-year history. On Monday, while 33 of 361 testing labs remained dysfunctional, the organisers said they were accommodating 8,000 candidates who had to sit out. Almost 60% of the affected candidates were conveyed the time and date of the rescheduled test.

IIM-A director Samir Barua, along with Prometric COO Charles Karnan, VP & GM (Asia Pacific, Japan and Africa) Ramesh Nava, Prometric MD (India) Saumitra Roy and NIIT CEO Vijay Thandani addressed the media on a day that saw the Union HRD ministry seeking a factual report from the CAT committee chairman Satish Deodhar. As CAT went computer-based for its 2.41 lakh aspirants, the CAT



In Good Faith

committee of the IIMs provided questions and outsourced the responsibility to conduct the test to Prometric. While on the first day, the testing and assessing agency stated in a press release that none of the centres were closed down, the agency did some damage-control on Monday. "We did not want to create panic among the students," said Mr Saumitra Roy.

The organisers attributed the failure to a virus attack and said other technical problems too were reported from different testing labs. "Virus attack remains to be the major reason. We also faced hardware problems at some centres. However, affected students have been either moved to the capacity available or rescheduled. Every candidate will be accommodated," IIM-A director said. Prometric COO

Charles Karnan said steps have been taken to fix the labs that faced problem. "We visited individual sites and made sure every thing went right but were unable to get all right. In all, 47 labs that did not work yesterday which were quarantined. Today, 33 continued to be quarantined. We are improving the network on a day-to-day basis," Karnan said.

When asked if a mock test earlier could have the day, Mr Barua said it had indeed been conducted by the organisers. "But given the magnitude of the test, there is no guarantee that it will go right," he said, adding 62% of affected candidates were already rescheduled and the organisers were trying to accommodate candidates' preference in terms of city and centre choice.

HRD ministry seeks factual report on CAT

Our Political Bureau
NEW DELHI

IN A move aimed at distancing itself from the Common Admission Test (CAT) online examination fiasco, the human resource development ministry has asked the convenor of CAT Satish Deodhar of IIM Ahmedabad to submit a status report.

In a letter to Mr Deodhar on Monday, the ministry asked him to submit a factual report on the whole issue of disruption in the test. The online test is being conducted by an American firm Prometric. The ministry's move comes after three days of confusion over the CAT.

Senior officials in the ministry said that there was little that the government could do in the current situation, as the examination is prepared and administered by the IIMs independently. "It is the IIMs that awarded the contract to Prometric. Government interference at this stage will not help", an official said. Prometric has been awarded an \$40 million contract by the Indian Institutes of Management to computerise the CAT. Sources indicated that the IIM Ahmedabad director Samir Barua had assured HRD minister Kapil Sibal that the matter would be resolved soon.

However, the CAT fiasco could not have been more ill-timed for the IIMs. Sources said that the IIMs inability to effectively administer the online admission test could be used as an argument for continued government involvement in these institutes. The IIMs, particularly Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Calcutta, have asked for greater autonomy as they were no longer financially dependent on the government for funds. CAT, which went online for the first time this year, ran into trouble for the third consecutive day when a computer crash stalled the exam at centres in three cities. On Saturday and Sunday, the first two days on the examination, computers crashed in 40 centres across the country.

Mouse got the CAT

For Round-The-Year Online Tests

THE glitches in the first online Common Admission Test (CAT) for the Indian Institutes of Management have put 5,000 students to much distress. This is unfortunate, but technical snags can be sorted out and the way forward remains on-line tests for all entrance exams. With the caveat that students must be given flexibility in when to take the tests. Ideally, it should be possible for students to take the test throughout the year. Such a system will be in sync with the best international practice. The Graduate Record Examination (GRE) general test, to assess the advanced study potential of students enrolling in universities in the US, is online and round the year. This test is, however, paper-based in a few countries including China, Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan. The GRE subject tests, paper-based worldwide, are held thrice a year. The Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) too is computer adaptive. The test is conducted through the year and hence gives students several options from which to choose a convenient date. So is the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). These tests are given 30-40 times a year on pre-determined dates at over 4,000 secure-internet based centres across the globe. Back home, Manipal University and Birla Institute of Technology & Science have been conducting on-line entrance exams. over the past few years.

In Manipal, the university experimented with online tests to enrol post-graduate students who were fewer in number. It was later scaled up to cover students seeking admissions for undergraduate courses. Given that over 2.4 lakh students registered for CAT this year, Prometric, the agency entrusted with the task of conducting the online exam, ought to have had a back-up plan and probably conducted mock tests. Rural electrification and publicly funded optical fibre networks in all parts of the country are complementary investments that the government must make, to remove the present elitist bias in computer access. As on-line testing becomes ubiquitous, felicity with the hardware should not be a differentiating factor for those being tested.