

# CAT could take lessons from other online exams

Shelley Singh  
NEW DELHI

**THE** recently concluded 10-day long Common Admission Test (CAT) for a ticket to the country's premier B-schools has been marred with software and hardware glitches, disrupting the smooth flow of exams. A few thousand candidates will take the test again in mid-January, hopefully without computers malfunctioning or bugs hitting the exams, bringing curtains down on the first computer based CAT exam. The Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and its examination partner Prometric may well breathe easy now. However, computer based exams are not new and the CAT organisers could well take a few lessons from other similar exams held across the country.

While CAT has been a lot talked about because of its marquee status and a quarter million students ap-

leaders in education testing space.

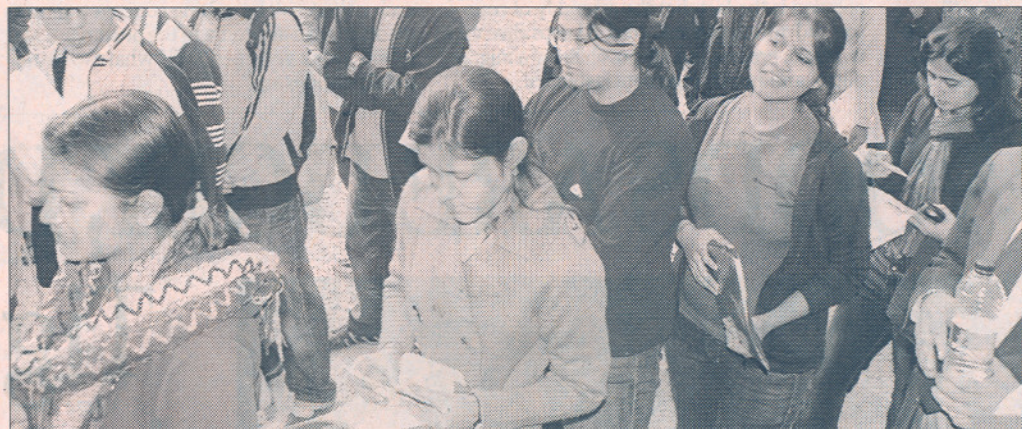
Despite the current hiccups with CAT, experts say future of exams is actually more digital than ever before. Tests will be taken on computers via click of mouse, be speech and touch enabled, on mobile phones and even on cloud computing platforms enabling students an option of multiple devices. Benefits of technology enabled testing—in terms of preventing leakages, easier logistics, flexible options to students on choosing exam dates and instant results—are too compelling, pushing the move to technology based tests. IIMs need to seriously look at how others do it, almost without any hiccups.

Says V S Bijoy, director center for management services, AIMA, "Since technology penetration is limited, we have offered students an option to take either paper or computer based MAT exam. In September 3,000 students opted for online tests and this number has doubled to

a central server and accessed by local servers at test centers, from where students download the paper and answer the multiple choice questions. Students know the score as soon as they complete the exam.

On the problems in CAT exam, Gautam Puri, managing director, Career Launcher who took both AIMA and CAT test at the same centre in Delhi says, "There were no problems with the AIMA test, but the CAT paper took over 10 minutes to download. Besides the delay I didn't have any other problem. However, students at my centre complained about software problems." Mr Puri is a regular at management tests, citing that it helps him get first hand knowledge on the kind of questions asked and how Career Launcher, an education services provider, can help its students.

Down in Bangalore, Eduquity is helping institutes in delivering computer based tests. It has a 300 people



peating for a few thousand seats, its not the only computer based exam in the country. All India Management Association's (AIMA) Management Aptitude Test (MAT) went digital from September this year. Premier engineering institute Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS), Pilani's admission test taken by 1.25 lakh students is computer based and so are exams conducted by Manipal University, Tolani Maritime Institute and a few others.

Education testing companies like Eduquity, MeritTrac and Attest routinely conduct computer based tests in the country. Globally, computer based exam market is over \$1 billion, growing at about 12-15% a year, says Uday Kulkarni, executive vice president, Attest, the arm of Aptech that conducts tests. Prometric and Pearson are among global

6,000 for December." AIMA conducts its MAT exam four times a year and from this year it has given the option to students to take either the paper based or computer based test. About 3.5 lakh students take MAT every year at centers in 90 cities across the country, while the computer option is available at 10 cities.

On the other hand, BITS, Pilani's admission test has been digital since 2005. Says G Raghuraman, deputy director, academics, BITS, Pilani, "After the CAT fiasco, questions have been raised on feasibility on computer-based tests in India. Building in redundancy and stress test of your exam is critical to having a successful digital exam. The benefits of using technology are too compelling to ignore." BITS conducts its exam at 20 centers across the country over 40 days. Questions reside on

team which looks at question bank management, security, testing computers at centers, ensuring right person takes the test and so on. Says R Dharendra, CEO, Eduquity, "In India you have to plan for the poor infrastructure—from power back-ups to viruses in the local area network. We conduct about three million computer based tests a year."

Experts believe that despite glitches, there's no option but to use computers for exams. Mr Kulkarni of Attest says, "Last few years has seen complaints of papers leaking (even for IIMs and civil services) and questions on fair assessment. With better encryption technologies and better bandwidth, the move to online testing will gain momentum." Mr Raghuraman of BITS adds that the flexibility and security offered by technology makes it more attractive.

