

Retest to be held on June 21 in existing pen-and-paper mode: Education minister

NEET to turn computer-based next year

**BASANT KUMAR
MOHANTY**

New Delhi: The all-India undergraduate medical and dental science entrance test, NEET-UG, will from next year become a computer-based exam to reduce the possibility of malpractice, education minister Dharmendra Pradhan said on Friday.

This year's National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (Undergraduate), cancelled because of "irregularities", will be conducted again on June 21 in the existing pen-and-paper mode, he added.

Computer-based tests (CBT) are free of the risk of leak associated with the processes of printing, transporting and storing physical papers, and allow larger-scale randomisation of the questions and their sequence as an additional safeguard against cheating. They are, however, vulnerable to hacking and technical snags such as system crashes, slow servers and power outages.

"From next year, the NEET will be held through the CBT mode. The origin of the prob-

lem is OMR (optical mark recognition)," Pradhan told a news conference.

The OMR refers to the question-cum-answer paper on which candidates have to darken printed bubbles with a pen. The papers are evaluated digitally.

Close to 23 lakh students took the NEET on May 3 and the National Testing Agency (NTA) cancelled it on May 12 after finding that many of the questions had been predicted in a "guess paper" published earlier.

A leak of NEET questions in Jharkhand and Bihar in 2024 had prompted the education ministry set up a committee, headed by former Isro chairman K. Radhakrishnan, to suggest reforms to the exam process, data security protocols and the NTA's structure and functioning.

Pradhan said the committee had recommended holding the test in the computer-based mode, but "we had not implemented it" so far.

An academic who didn't want to be identified said computer-based tests were vulnerable to malpractice, too, flagging how cheating allegations involving the Joint Entrance Ex-



Uttar Pradesh Youth Congress activists burn an effigy in Lucknow on Friday during a protest against the cancellation of the NEET-UG 2026. (PTI)

amination (JEE) Main of 2021 had led to a CBI investigation.

Private hackers from Jharkhand had allegedly accessed the computers of some examinees in Haryana that year and helped them. The NTA later debarred about 20 students from taking the test till 2024.

Such hacking is, however, unlikely to involve as large a number of examinees as a paper leak can.

"For the CBT mode, the

computers have to be checked to ensure they are hacking-free. The computers need to have certain high-security hardware and software," the academic said.

"There's no data suggesting the testing facilities provided by private agencies (at the exam centres) are hacking-free."

To a question, Pradhan said: "Comparatively to OMR, the CBT is more protected. Cyber

crime is happening, it remains a challenge, but we have to trust the system of our country."

He said the nature of malpractices tends to change with time but corrective measures would be adopted based on the CBI report.

An education ministry official said that since the testing centres have limited numbers of computers, computer-based tests are spread over several days.

For instance, the latest JEE Main was held from April 2 to April 8. An NEET held in the computer-based mode will need to be spread over a larger number of days than the JEE Main given that it involves a far larger number of examinees. Each day's question paper will have to be different, too.

This means the NTA will have to resort to "normalisation", a statistical method to address the different levels of scoring on different days, attributable to varying levels of the difficulty of the questions.

Besides, the number of cities where the test can be held will be smaller, given the various technical requirements

— such as cyber security — of a computer-based test.

The latest NEET was held in 565 Indian cities, compared with 308 for the JEE Main.

The registration data for the May 3 test will be carried forward to the June 21 re-test, the NTA has said. No additional examination fee will be levied; rather, the fees already paid for the original test will be refunded.

Pradhan said the NTA would give the candidates a window of seven days to seek a change of city where they want to take the re-test. The examinees will also get an additional 15 minutes to help them complete formalities such as signing the OMR sheet at the beginning and the end.

This means the test will be held from 2pm to 5.15pm. The admit cards will be sent by June 14.

Some of the states last year organised transport to help the examinees reach the test centres. The Union government will talk to the state governments to see if they can provide transport on exam day, Pradhan said.