IN PERSPECTIVE

A new measure of merit

The UPSC should identify administrators with critical thinking. Can universities help prepare them?

NEIL TANNEN, PAUL NEWMAN AND DANIYA SHAH

When the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) marked a century of institutional history on October 1, 2026, the occasion provided an opportunity to revisit a consequential idea in Indian public life: merit. At the Commission's centenary discussions, UPSC Chairman Ajay Kumar argued for greater emphasis on reasoning, spontaneous thinking, and judgement under ambiguity, rather than predictable or coached responses.

That intervention deserves attention beyond the civil services examination. If India increasingly expects its future administrators to think rather than rehearse, an important question follows: are its universities educating students for that kind of merit?

The answer matters because administrative competence is not created at the examination centre. It is built over years through reading, discussion, research, writing, disagreement, and exposure to unfamiliar problems. Yet for many students, university education and preparation for public service remain oddly disconnected. A student may spend three or four years completing a degree and then enter a coaching institute to acquire the analytical writing, current-affairs awareness, and structured argument required for competitive examinations. Coaching is not, by itself, the problem. The deeper concern is why higher education so often fails to cultivate these capacities as part of ordinary academic life.

Universities should not become extensions of the UPSC coaching industry. Their purpose is much wider. But the qualities expected of a capable administrator overlap considerably with those expected of an educated graduate: the ability to interpret evidence, distinguish argument from assertion, recognise competing perspectives, communicate clearly, exercise ethical judgement, and respond intelligently when there is no ready-made answer.

This is why the debate over merit cannot end with changes in UPSC question papers or interview techniques. It must reach university classrooms. In many institutions, assessment still rewards predictability. Students prepare around likely questions, standard notes, and familiar answer structures. Success can depend more on reproducing material in recognisable form than on demonstrating whether knowledge has been understood, challenged, or applied.

Artificial intelligence makes this problem harder to ignore. Generative AI can summarise readings, explain concepts, organise arguments, and produce competent prose within seconds. The educational premium must therefore shift towards interpretation, discrimination, and judgement.

That does not require exotic reform. A Political Science student can analyse an actual Centre-state dispute rather than merely define federalism. An Economics student can interpret a public budget and identify trade-offs. Students of Public Administration can examine why the same government programme produces different outcomes across districts. Sociology students can study how institutions operate differently across communities. Case studies, simulations, field research, policy briefs, oral examinations, and research-based assignments can test whether students can use knowledge rather than merely store it.

Merit also cannot be separated from unequal academic environments. Candidates for national examinations emerge from very different institutions. Some of them study in universities with strong libraries, experienced faculty, active seminar cultures, and access to internships and mentors. Others come from institutions struggling with vacancies, weak infrastructure, and limited academic exposure.

Beyond recruitment

The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, has already placed multidisciplinary learning, experiential education, research, and critical thinking at the centre of reform in higher education. But curriculum reform will mean little if classroom practices and examination systems continue to reward the habits of the old model. Universities must move away from the assumption that teaching is complete once the syllabus has been covered. The more meaningful test is whether students can use what they have learned when confronted with an unfamiliar problem.

There is also a democratic reason for this. Universities are among the few institutions where young adults should learn how to question evidence, disagree without hostility, recognise complexity, and revise their views when confronted with stronger arguments. These habits matter whether a graduate enters the civil service, business, academia, journalism, or public life.

Therefore, the UPSC's second century offers an opportunity to rethink more than recruitment. If India expects future administrators to navigate climate emergencies, AI, urbanisation, misinformation, and social conflict, the preparation must begin long before a candidate enters an examination hall.

The new idea of merit should not be the ability to remember more than everyone else. It should be the capacity to think clearly when the answer has not already been provided. Indian universities have as much responsibility for cultivating that capacity as the UPSC has for identifying it.

(Neil is Head – Department of Political Science, St Joseph's University, Bengaluru; Paul is Dean – School of Humanities and Social Sciences, and Daniya is a research scholar at the university)