

Implications of National Exit Test (NExT) for Medical Students and Medical Education in India: A Comprehensive Assessment

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The National Exit Test (NExT), proposed to be introduced in India soon, will serve as a standardized national examination with two primary purposes. The first will be to function as a licensure examination to authenticate the competence of medical graduates for registration as a medical practitioner of contemporary medicine within India. The second will be to ascertain the eligibility and ranking of candidates interested in continuing their education in postgraduate medical studies nationwide.¹ The need for a standardized nationwide licentiate examination was felt to serve as a uniform benchmark for all medical graduates across India, promoting equal standards of education in the health sector. This will help ensure a level of comparable competence among all medical professionals practicing in the country. Furthermore, this examination replaces the Foreign Medical Graduate Examination (FMGE), thereby necessitating foreign medical graduates who aspire to practice in India, to demonstrate similar proficiency and skills. The successes of other standardized licensing examinations like the Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board (PLAB) in the UK, and the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) in the USA, provide pertinent examples of how such a system can yield positive outcomes (**Table I**). These examinations validate the readiness of the healthcare professionals to practice medicine while maintaining the quality of healthcare delivery. The inception of the NExT examination coincides with systematic changes in the UK's medical licensing examinations. The PLAB examination is being replaced by the United Kingdom Medical Licensing Assessment (UKMLA) which would

serve as a common licensing examination for both British and Foreign Medical Graduates (FMGs).² This mirrors the proposition of the NExT where Indian Medical Graduates (IMGs) will have to take the same examination as FMGs.

PATTERN OF EXAMINATION

With the introduction of a new pattern of examination, the question arises regarding the ideal time for undergraduate students to attempt it. The period of internship is generally extremely demanding, with rotations through various departments leaving little room for systematic study. In such circumstances, preparing for an entrance exam can be both physically and emotionally exhausting. By definition, a licensing exam is necessary before internship begins, to enable students to legally treat patients. The key purpose highlighted by the NMC for conducting NExT in two phases, with the theoretical part being conducted first, is to ease the academic burden and allow students to concentrate on honing their clinical skills during internship. NExT Step 2 will exclusively be a practical examination, scheduled to take place following internship, with the objective of evaluating the clinical expertise that students have cultivated during their internship. Given these factors, it appears necessary to schedule the NExT -1 examination after the final academic year and the NExT -2 examination after internship. The final year curriculum, combined with allied subjects and basic sciences, is quite vast. Hence, this might be difficult for a section of students to review everything in their final year. Nevertheless, this schedule seems necessary if this format of examinations is to be followed. NExT, when implemented, is going to replace National Eligibility cum Entrance Test

Table I Comparison of the proposed NExT with other standard licensing exams like PLAB and USMLE.^{1,6,7}

	<i>NExT</i>	<i>USMLE</i>	<i>PLAB</i>
Purpose	For license to practice in India and to get PG seat	It is a path towards licensure and residency in USA	Enables you to get GMC registration so that you can practice in the UK
Exam administrator	AIIMS	FSMB & NBME	General medical council of UK
STEPS	NExT 1 MCQ Exam; NExT 2 Clinical Exam	STEP 1; STEP 2; CK; STEP 3	PLAB 1; PLAB 2
Total duration of written exam	NExT 1 is 3-day MCQ exam done in 2 shifts (morning and post-lunch)	Step 1 – Single day exam, 8 hrs divided into 7 blocks Step 2 CK- Single day exam, 9 hrs exam divided into 8 blocks Step 3 - 2-day exam divided in blocks	PLAB 1 – Single day exam of 3 hrs PLAB 2 – Single day exam of 3 hrs 20 mins
Cost	Mock exam ¹ 2000 Actual exam fees not notified	Total Exam registration costs of all step - ¹ 365,114	Total exam registration fees of both steps ¹ 107,512
Difficulty	NMC has said that NExT would be more clinically oriented along with 5-15% recalls	Step 1 and 2 consist of MCQ based questions with long clinical cases. Step 3 consists of MCQ questions and computer-based case simulations	PLAB 1 is a MCQ based exam with each question having a clinical case. PLAB 2 is an OSCE based exam having 18 stations
Qualifying marks	50% separately in each step paper	Currently, the qualifying marks are as follows: Step 1- Pass/Fail Step 2 CK- 214 Step 3- 198 However, the qualifying score varies with each year (determined by the USMLE management committee)	The passing score of PLAB 1 changes with each exam, but usually lies around 120. For PLAB 2, one must achieve the passing score in at least 10 of the 18 stations to get an overall pass.
Percentage of Applicants who qualified the exam	30.8% for FMGE (NExT has not been conducted till now) ³	For STEP 1, the passing percentage among US graduates is 67.6% while among IMGs it is 59.4%. This percentage varies with each year. ⁴	For 2022, the passing percentage for PLAB 1 was 70.9% while for PLAB 2 it was 64.8%. This percentage changes each year. ⁵
Frequency	Twice a year	The exam can be attempted throughout the year. Candidates have the option of choosing an eligibility period within which the USMLE exam would be administered.	PLAB 1 is conducted 4 times a year (February, May, August, and November) PLAB 2 is an OSCE-based exam held in the UK every week.

AIIMS: All India Institute of Medical Sciences; CK: Clinical knowledge; FMGE: Foreign Medical Graduate Examination; FSMB: Federation of State Medical Boards; GMC: General Medical Council; MCQ: Multiple Choice Questions; NBME: National Board of Medical Examiners; NExT, National Exit Test; NMC: National Medical Commission; PLAB: Professional and Linguistic Assessment Board; PG: Post Graduation; UK: United Kingdom; USA: United States of America; USMLE: United States Medical Licensing Examination.

Postgraduate (NEET PG) examination, the nationwide entrance examination for admission to various postgraduate medicine courses. The changes which NExT is proposed to bring out, as compared to NEET-PG pattern of examinations, are summarized in **Table II**.

DISADVANTAGES OF NExT

The introduction of the concept of the NExT has encountered some level of opposition on various fronts. A fundamental query pertains to whose standards are being

Table II Changes introduced in the proposed NExT pattern as compared to the current postgraduate entrance examination (NEET-PG).^{1,8}

<i>Parameter of comparison</i>	<i>NEET PG</i>	<i>NexT</i>
Purpose of examination	Establish ranking of candidates for national medical postgraduate entrance	Provide license to Indian medical graduates, and establish ranking of postgraduate entrance
Scope of examination	Excludes entrance examination for the central institutes of AIIMS, PGIMER, JIPMER and NIMHANS. Does not serve the purpose of granting any medical license.	Granting of license to FMGs and IMGs for practicing medicine in India. Acts as an entrance exam for foreign graduates and other all Indian medical institutes including the central institutes for postgraduation.
Eligibility for appearing in the examination	Completion of internship	NExT 1: Post-completion of MBBS Phase III-Part 2 NExT 2: Post-completion of internship
Number of examinations to be taken and pattern of examination	Single one day MCQ-based examination exams	2 examinations: NExT 1 includes 6 MCQ based theory exams NExT 2, a practical exam
Duration of examination	3 hours 30 minutes	Over a period of 3 days: Pre-lunch - 3 hours Break - 2 hours Post-lunch - 1.5 hours
Total number of questions to be attempted	200	Pre-lunch – 120 Post-lunch - 60 3 days exam with 2 sessions each day. Total - 540
Knowledge level being assessed and type of questions	Varies every year. NEET PG 2023 paper analysis ¹¹ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderately difficult level of questions • 60%: clinical-based • 15-20%: one-liner questions • More than 35 image-based questions (moderate level difficulty) • Covers 19 Subjects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Higher domains of medical knowledge’ to be assessed • ‘High quality MCQs’ • Clinical case scenarios would comprise the majority of questions. • Focus on clinical subjects & clinical aspects and applied aspects of basic science subjects • MCQ items distributed approximately as follows: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Problem-solving and analytical skill type 60-70% 2. Comprehension type 20-30% 3. Recall type 5-15%
Frequency of examination	Annual	Biannual (proposed in May and November)

AIIMS: All India Institute of Medical Sciences; FMG: Foreign Medical Graduate; IMG: Indian Medical Graduate; JIPMER: Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education & Research; MCQ: Multiple Choice Question; NEET-PG: National Eligibility cum Entrance Test- Post Graduation; NexT: National Exit Test; NIMHANS: National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences; PGIMER: Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research.

assessed by NExT. It is unclear whether the focus is on evaluating the competency of medical students, scrutinizing the quality of college faculties, or appraising the effectiveness of state universities in setting final-year MBBS exam papers. Despite its goal of universalizing standards in medical education, there remains ambiguity regarding the specific benchmarks being assessed. This calls for more transparent communication and higher involvement of all stakeholders, to ensure the validity and

fairness of NExT exam. State universities are wary of the central government having the authority to supersede their right of conducting licensing examinations. It raises doubts regarding a centralized body determining the validity of an MBBS degree, even when the universities have the mandate to confer these degrees.⁹ The announcement of NExT has also sparked widespread unrest among medical students nationwide. Requests for postponement and petitions against it have been filed

across the country by concerned students, faculty members, and parents.^{9,10,11} These expressions of dissent highlight the level of apprehension, confusion and concern surrounding the implementation of the new examination system.

The proposed format of the examinations poses several challenges. The examination schedule, which stretches over five days and includes two sessions each day (morning and post-lunch), with two break days in between (**Table III**), presents a significant mental and physical challenge for students.

NExT is proposed as an ambitious exam, serving both as a qualifying and licensing examination and a postgraduate (PG) entrance test. Thus, it seeks to address two very different objectives. A qualifying exam typically assesses the fundamental skills and knowledge that students learn in their medical curriculum. On the other hand, postgraduate entrance exams should pose more advanced-level questions. Thus, merging these two distinct assessments into a single exam might not be the best approach. To qualify NExT, a student needs to score at least 50% in all subjects.¹ An analysis of our current PG entrance exams shows that only about 25% of students score above 50%.¹² If NExT maintains similar standards, a large number of students may not receive their primary medical qualification, even after completing five years of a rigorous course. A decreased number of graduating medical students may lead to a reduced pool of general practitioners available to serve the country. Currently, the

cut-off qualifying marks for postgraduate entrance exams stands at approximately 30%. This might be a more reasonable passing threshold for the licensing examination, as opposed to the 50% suggested by the NMC.¹² This merger of licensing examination and postgraduate entrance exam can pose additional complications. Some students may not wish to take the PG entrance exam, but continue as junior residents, or plan to practice medicine abroad, or even take civil service or other examinations. NExT will force them to sit for an unnecessary PG entrance test, while intensifying the difficulty level of a licensing exam. The provision of negative marking in NExT has also drawn objections. A licensing exam should not adopt a competitive format, where incorrect answers jeopardize an individual's probability of passing the exam. Licensing exams in other countries, such as the USMLE or PLAB, do not have a provision for negative marking (**Table I**).^{6,7} Further, MBBS students, throughout their educational journey, are habituated to subjective methods of examination. Despite the Competency-Based Medical Education (CBME) curriculum mandating a certain proportion of multiple-choice questions (MCQ's) in university exams, students are generally not prepared to tackle a test with an overwhelming number of MCQs.¹³ A sudden alteration in the exam pattern may lead to an increase in popularity of coaching centers. This would shift the students' primary focus away from gaining knowledge and developing clinical skills, towards rote learning of entrance exam questions. Scoring high in the examination would not necessarily equate to being a proficient doctor. The skills needed to excel in clinical practice and the ability to answer MCQ's are two distinctly different competencies. Another challenge is for students clearing all subjects in their first attempt, but not content with their score. A second attempt within the next six months is not permitted; instead, they are obliged to commence their internship.¹ A re-attempt to improve scores is being allowed only after completion of internship.

As per the Indian Medical Association (IMA), testing medical graduates on the basis of high-quality MCQ's may be unjust. It might put few less privileged students, specifically the economically challenged ones, who lack access to coaching material or MCQ question banks, at a disadvantage.¹⁴ They have further pointed out that almost half of India's total number of medical colleges were established only 10-15 years ago. The quality of these relatively new institutions cannot be compared to the ones with experienced faculty and well-established systems in place.¹⁴ This argument becomes more relevant as AIIMS (Delhi) has been tasked with conducting the exit exam.¹ It becomes crucial to ensure a common minimum standard of

Table III Examination pattern of NExT 1 as proposed by the NMC¹

<i>Day</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Number of questions</i>
Day 1	Medicine and allied subjects	3 hours	120
	<i>2 hours break</i>		
	Pediatrics	1.5 hours	60
Day 2: Break			
Day 3	Surgery and allied subjects	3 hours	120
	<i>2 hours break</i>		
	Otorhinolaryngology	1.5 hours	60
Day 4: Break			
Day 5	Obstetrics and Gynecology	3 hours	120
	<i>2 hours break</i>		
	Ophthalmology	1.5 hours	60

education before implementing a uniform examination. This necessitates regular assessments and upgrades of these newly established institutions, which can take a long time. However, it is important as the NExT will be a licensing exam. Colleges across the nation are not adhering to the same teaching pace at present. Many institutions are behind schedule, and there's a considerable backlog in medical education due to COVID-19 pandemic. Organizing the exam in the near future may be seen as unjust without ensuring pan-India uniformity in the medical education calendar.

Implementing NExT is also likely to be challenging and there is a need to look at the possible obstacles beforehand. The biannual format would necessitate counseling sessions also. However, coordinating six-monthly counseling and commencing new PG batches twice a year may pose challenges for the academic departments of various colleges. It would eventually require a biannual MD/MS exam as well, which will be additional administrative work. The proposal that the second counseling session in December can allocate the 'remaining vacant' seats after the May-June counseling¹, is akin to the 'mop-up round' of the current postgraduate counseling process. It undermines the fundamental purpose of having a biannual exam, as it does not provide equal opportunities for students appearing in the two rounds of NExT. It is being perceived as unfair to the students attempting the November exam. If biannual attempts are to be introduced, the postgraduate seats available should be evenly distributed between the two exam periods within a year.

The current format does not clearly address the considerations regarding attendance in theoretical and practical aspects of curriculum. It remains unclear whether colleges have the authority to prevent students from appearing in NExT-1 if they fail to meet the minimum attendance criteria. Likewise, the attendance requirements for NExT-2 has also not been clarified. Currently, a student failing to meet the attendance requirement for a clinical posting during internship is given an extension at the end of internship. However, with NExT-2 being a biannual exam, it is unclear whether a candidate falling short in attendance will be permitted to attempt after six months only.

There appears to be uncertainty surrounding the inclusion of the subjects of Otorhinolaryngology and Ophthalmology in the exam. The 2019 and 2020 batches have already cleared or are going to appear in their university exams for these subjects.

If a student chooses to postpone his/her NExT-1 attempt, opting instead to prepare further, it will result in a

cohort of "pre-interns". This group, intentionally delaying their education and training to improve their chances of securing a postgraduate seat, will need to be addressed in the NMC document.

ADVANTAGES OF NExT

The introduction of NExT, if implemented efficiently, also presents numerous advantages. It would effectively decrease the number of examinations a student is required to take post their undergraduate course, thereby decreasing a substantial 'examination' burden on the students. It will simultaneously ensure that FMG's possess similar competencies, basic knowledge, and skills as their Indian counterparts. The clinical-oriented structure of NExT emphasizes practical relevance over memorization, which is a more prevalent approach in the current format. It is likely to promote a deeper understanding and practical application of medical knowledge. Completing NExT 1 before internship, with NExT Step 2 (solely a practical exam) scheduled after internship, a student is likely to dedicate the internship towards honing clinical skills. A biannual exam will also provide students with more opportunities to prove their abilities and secure their career. The score from NExT Step 1 will be valid for five years, which benefits students desiring a break between their internship and the commencement of their postgraduate studies. It is also advantageous for students considering applying for examinations abroad or civil service examinations. Should they not succeed in those endeavors, they can rely on these scores without the need for extensive re-preparation. This provision can significantly alleviate the pressure of uncertainty, contributing positively to the mental well-being of students. With the exam being spread over three days, with breaks in between, it is unlikely that a student's performance will be solely determined by the events of a single three-hour window, as is the case with the current system. This format allows for a more balanced assessment of a student's capabilities.

In the long term, the MCQ format could prove advantageous. Subjective evaluation is variable, and time-consuming. MCQ-based answers can enable faster results. At present, the university examinations are subjective, often benefiting the students adept at using ornate language. The disadvantages suffered by students with poor language skills but better clinical capabilities will be addressed. Switching to an objective MCQ format could potentially rectify this disparity.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

Considering the advantages and disadvantages posed by NExT, benchmarking and standardization of medical

education should be considered an essential precondition for its implementation. A basic common standard of education should be guaranteed across all medical colleges throughout the country before the introduction of a uniform examination. This assurance could be achieved through regular assessments and enhancements. This can help ensure fairness for students from recently established medical colleges and those from rural backgrounds or economically disadvantaged sectors. As this examination also serves as a licensing exam, it is crucial to ensure an equitable playing field for all participants. In the long run, NExT serving as a unified licensing exam across India is undeniably beneficial for the standardization and quality of medical practice nationwide.

CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING NExT

The journey of the NExT, from its proposal in 2019 under the NMC Act to the present day, has been marked by numerous changes and controversies, leaving students' minds clouded with confusion and uncertainty. Initially proposed in the NMC Act 2019, the NExT was to be conducted within three years of the NMC gazette notification, leaving the exact timeline open-ended.¹⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation, causing delays in the medical curriculum and leaving students uncertain about when the exam would take place. Despite the initial plan to hold the NExT for the 2017 batch in the year 2023, no concrete information was provided, leading to confusion and frustration among students. In 2020, news reports stated that the NExT would not be held before September 2024, but there was no official word from the NMC during this period, leaving students in the dark about the exact schedule and format of the exam.¹⁶ This lack of official communication added to the anxiety and stress levels of aspiring doctors who were unsure about their prospects.

When a webinar was finally conducted by the NMC with the 2019 batch on June 27, 2023, it provided some clarity but also raised further questions.¹⁷ The proposed format was biannual, with the exam to be held in November and May, but specific dates remained unconfirmed. Students were left guessing about its commencement, making it difficult for them to plan their preparations and future accordingly. After the release of the official gazette on NExT regulations on 30th June, 2023, many doubts were clarified and registrations for a mock test were started.¹⁸ However, the statement made by the Honorable Health Minister on July 6, 2023, added to the confusion as it stated that the NExT would not be held for the 2019 batch as a licensing exam and that they would be required to write NExT only for their registration.¹⁹ This ambiguous stance raised further concerns about the

whole purpose and implementation of the NExT exam. Finally, on July 13, 2023, the NMC officially postponed the NExT, with AIIMS releasing an official notice of cancellation of the mock test on July 18, 2023.^{20,21} However, no reasons for the postponement or a new timeline were provided. This decision further added more confusion to the students who were eagerly awaiting some resolution and certainty regarding the exam.

THE ROAD AHEAD

As we turn our attention to the future, it's important to outline how students can best prepare for this new exam format and to discuss what might be expected in their journey ahead. In the decision-making process regarding the implementation of this new exam format, it is crucial to actively involve both students and faculty members from medical colleges. As major stakeholders, the students' perspectives must be taken into consideration. It is particularly important to approach students from newly established colleges to understand and address their concerns and apprehensions regarding this proposed format. Their valuable input can lead to a more inclusive and well-rounded decision-making process.

On 30th July 2023, the NMC released a notice stating that the NExT exam has been deferred until further information is available. The mock test organized by AIIMS was also called off. For students, the immediate pressure was alleviated as the exam has been temporarily postponed. However, it is recommended that students continue their preparation, particularly emphasizing the clinical components over rote memorization. This is important considering that the existing postgraduate entrance exams have also been progressively moving towards a more clinical orientation. It's a transition that favors understanding and application over mere recall of facts. Although the NMC has announced the deferral of the exam until further notice, they have not provided any specific timeline. Thus, there remains a distinct chance that the students of batch 2019 may have to undertake NExT in May 2024. For Batch 2020 and other younger batches, they will likely need to sit for NExT after their final year. Therefore, it is in their best interest to commence their preparation as early as possible.

The implementation of NExT seems to be rushed and it's clear that many factors haven't been fully considered by the administrators, as suggested by the gaps in their exam proposal, but if implemented properly NExT has the potential to elevate standards of healthcare training in India. However, this exam can revolutionize standardized testing for medical students in India. If the issues surrounding NExT can be addressed effectively, NExT can be significantly successful. As times change, so too must

the curriculum and testing methods evolve. While it's crucial not to resist change, it's equally important not to dive headlong into new approaches without a thorough examination of their potential consequences and addressing their short-comings.

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