

## **Excerpts from an open letter to the Japanese government concerning education and university entrance exams**

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The Japanese government has made great strides to create a more representative democracy through directly asking the people to express their views through a variety of panels. Recently the Prime Minister's Office and Ministry of Education asked the general public the following questions in reference to educational reforms:

1. What are the important basic ideas for education?
2. What kind of roles should each person, school, family, and social community play and how should we proceed with lifelong education?
3. How should we think about individuals and the public?
4. What are some of concrete proposals for educational reform?

Here is an abridged version of a letter I sent to the Japanese Ministry of Education on Feb. 19, 2000.

Dear Prime Minister, Minister of Education, and Japanese people,

First of all I would like to compliment you for your offer to all people of Japan to openly communicate to you their ideas and feelings concerning their ideals for education in this new millennium. I assume this invitation is also meant for foreign residents and immigrants who also have a stake in education.

Let me mention three ideas for specific improvements in the fields in which I know best: entrance exams, teacher education, and English learning.

### **(1) Universities' Voluntary Agreement to Add Listening incrementally to English Entrance Exams**

I understand that the Center Test [大学入学者選抜大学入試センター試験] will soon have listening on the English portion of the test. That is excellent because testing listening will change teaching. And of course, since one still needs to know grammar and vocabulary to do well on a listening test, it is a more holistic way of testing for the ability to really use what one has learned.

One thing that you might suggest to universities (especially the private ones) is to voluntarily accompany you in this change and to agree to put listening on their exams at the same time. I would suggest an Incremental Plan for University Listening (IPFUL) in which everybody makes only 10% of their English test listening comprehension the first year and then each year increases it by 5% until it reaches at least 30% of the exam total. The advantages to this plan are that:

- When a large number (or all) universities agreed to do this, then no one university would lose money (which is one of the main reasons they won't add it now.)
- Doing it incrementally will allow high school teachers time to adapt and change their teaching to more communicative, "real use", methods of teaching over a period of years. It will allow the Ministry of Education time to create training programs to retrain teachers.
- Tying universities incremental change voluntarily to the that of the Center Test would show solidarity of the educational system in Japan toward learning for practical use, rather than merely rote memorization. This would put pressure on the universities to agree to the plan. If they know that the Center test and 34% of the national and public universities are doing this, then I believe many will sign on. All you need is a few to build leverage and then the others will probably follow. This may begin with just a few progressive prefectures and then snowball.

## **(2) The Testing of the Tests and the Reporting of Validity and Reliability**

The well-known Canadian educational researcher, Michael Fulani, said in October 1999 that one of the major areas where educators can stimulate collaborative learning communities is in "assessment literacy." This entails three things: (1) the gathering of student data and its analysis, (2) the ability to change teaching and structures based on this data, and (3) open discussions about assessment.

At present, my understanding is that, at most universities in Japan, open discussion of assessment is stifled. Most universities remain addicted to the entrance exam money and are afraid of losing this income. Student data from the exams is merely used to allow entrance to a certain number of students and no further analysis of the questions are made (the tests are not usually tested for validity or reliability). Because there is no data about the tests' reliability and validity, teaching and structures go unchanged. Universities need to develop more assessment literacy, to test their entrance exams, and to eventually report their validity and reliability publicly. I would urge the Ministry of Education to consider leading the way by doing this openly with their Center Test.

One colleague, Steve Ross, recently wrote in a personal correspondence:

As in all interfaces of public transaction with institutions, the utilitarian assumption of best practice prevails. Members of society assume that banks, corporations, and hospitals conduct their business professionally and ethically. Entrance examinations, in their dual role as income-generators for universities and as eudiometric instruments, are no exception to the best practice assumption. In order to ensure stakeholders' ongoing trust in institutional fairness and equal access, entrance examination policy needs to be firmly anchored in measurement practices that are rational, technically sound, justifiable, and concordant with the highest standards. Nothing short of such a policy should be considered ethical.

Merely telling teachers to teach more communicatively (as with the 1993 OC-ABC Curriculum) without changing the exams has not worked. Now the Center Exam is adding listening and other universities will follow in their footsteps I believe. The same process can happen with "assessment literacy." When the Center Exams start reporting their reliability and validity, then so will the other universities. When the Ministry of Education "walks their talk" and demonstrates what they want others to do, things will change more quickly.

At one university I know of, they did test their tests and they found the listening portion discriminated twice as well as the grammar/vocabulary (on the one test that had listening). However, they refused for financial reasons to add listening to their other exams. Hopefully the Incremental Plan mentioned in Proposal #1 could alleviate this fear of financial loss.

### **(3) Dethroning the Idea: Top-universities Automatically Lead to Top Jobs**

The belief in the idea that "government and top level companies hire only students from top level schools" runs the obsessive entrance exam system and the race to get into top level universities. If this is true, then government and companies need to reconsider the fairness of their hiring practices because they would seem prejudiced and incestuously harmful. To calm the society as a whole, stories of youths that have gone to regular universities and yet been hired by top firms and government because of their unique or superior attributes need telling. Such youths become near-peer-role-models for other youths that then do not give up on life because they didn't get into a top school. Keeping as many people's dreams alive as you possibly can, keeps them striving for those dreams and ultimately enriches the country. Depriving people of their dreams ultimately creates a creative brain drain and reduces our diversity and capability to respond flexibly. Students need to feel that there are second chances to succeed and to contribute to society. If junior and senior high school students already believe, at their tender ages, that they have failed in life because they haven't gotten into a high level school, then Japan is losing a great portion of its potential.

Thank you again for opening up these issues to public discussion. Might I finally suggest that to ensure an ongoing dialog with the public that you show you are indeed listening (reading) by periodically summarizing ideas coming from the public in your publications and communications. When people see that you are indeed serious about hearing their voices, then they will be more open to contributing their ideas and we will truly become a more collaborative learning society.

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(N.B. You can see an article concerning near-peer-role-models if you are interested at <http://tesl-ej.org/ej19/a1.html>.

Also see an example in the *Japan Times* Feb. 17, 2000, p. 20 about Cyber Agent creator [Susumu Fujita](#) who graduated "from a university in Tokyo").

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### **Reference**

Fullan, M. (1999 Dec). "[Leading change in professional learning communities](#)" speech at Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Conference in Nevada, [ASCD Education Update](#), 41 (8), 1 4.

**HTML:** [http://jalt.org/test/mur\\_2.htm](http://jalt.org/test/mur_2.htm) / **PDF:** <http://jalt.org/test/PDF/Murphey2.pdf>