

Promising practices

Competitive selection into higher education in Japan, coupled with diverse selection filters

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This case study describes a “Promising practice” drawn from an OECD review of Initial Teacher Preparation in Japan from 5-9 September 2016.

The OECD Review Team – Hannah von Ahlefeld (OECD), Francesca Caena (University of Venice), Kjetil Helgeland (OECD) and Danielle Toon (Learning First) – identified a number of “Promising practices” in each country. These practices may not be widespread or representative, but seen in the context of other challenges, they represent a strength or opportunity to improve the country’s initial teacher preparation system – and for other countries to learn from them.

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Promising practice 1.
Competitive selection into higher education in Japan,
coupled with diverse selection filters

Context

Selection into higher education in Japan, including initial teacher education (ITE), is traditionally linked to a standardised high-stakes national university entrance examination, known as the National Center Test for University Admissions (NCT). The NCT is administered once a year in January by an Independent Administrative Institution (IAI), the National Center for University Entrance Examinations (NCUEE), in collaboration with universities (National Center for University Entrance Examinations, 2018^[1]). The NCUEE completes test development, testing procedures, guidelines, scoring, and score notifications for the NCT, in addition to conducting research on the improvement of university admission selection filters, including the NCT. Most universities specify the subject areas and subjects to be used for their admissions procedures; and implement, manage and process the results of the NCT. (National Center for University Entrance Examinations, 2015^[2])

The NCT was introduced in 1979 to make standardised examinations available for public universities. In 2015, more than 79% of students were enrolled in private universities in Japan, compared to the OECD average of 31% (OECD, 2017^[3]), and there are more than 500 private universities in Japan providing teacher education (Table 1). In 2016, 767 four-year and two-year private and public universities (90%) employed the NCT in their admission processes (National Center for University Entrance Examinations, 2015^[2]). The examination is knowledge-based and contains multiple-choice items. However, the Japanese authorities are currently reviewing the NCT to include more open-ended question items (reference forthcoming). The NCT in the 2016 school year covered 30 subjects in 6 major subject areas, in accordance with the latest MEXT curriculum guidelines revised in March 2009:

- Literacy (Japanese)
- Geography and History
- Mathematics
- Science
- Civics
- Foreign Languages.

Table 1. Number of universities in Japan using the National Center Test for University Admissions (NCT), by type of university

| Fiscal year | National universities | | | Prefectural/municipal universities | | | Private universities | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|-----------|-----|------------------------------------|-----------|----|----------------------|-----------|----|
| | No. using NCAT | Total no. | % | No. using NCAT | Total no. | % | No. using NCAT | Total no. | % |
| 2009 | 82 | 82 | 100 | 74 | 92 | 80 | 487 | 595 | 82 |
| 2010 | 82 | 82 | 100 | 75 | 95 | 79 | 494 | 597 | 83 |
| 2011 | 82 | 82 | 100 | 79 | 95 | 83 | 504 | 599 | 84 |
| 2012 | 82 | 82 | 100 | 79 | 92 | 86 | 513 | 605 | 85 |
| 2013 | 82 | 82 | 100 | 81 | 90 | 90 | 520 | 606 | 86 |
| 2014 | 82 | 82 | 100 | 82 | 92 | 89 | 521 | 603 | 86 |
| 2015 | 82 | 82 | 100 | 84 | 89 | 94 | 523 | 604 | 87 |
| 2016 | 82 | 82 | 100 | 84 | 91 | 92 | 527 | 600 | 88 |
| 2017 | 82 | 82 | 100 | 86 | m | m | 526 | m | m |
| 2018 | 82 | 82 | 100 | 89 | m | m | 526 | m | m |

Notes: Japanese fiscal year starts on 1st of April and ends on 31st.

There are 86 national universities in Japan. However, four of them are the universities for graduate education, and thus they are removed from the total number of national universities.

Source: The number of universities using the national university admission examinations is available on the National Center for University Entrance Examinations website (www.dnc.ac.jp)

How is selection into initial teacher education competitive and diverse?

Diverse selection filters

In 2011, the National Center for University Entrance Examinations published guidance on university admissions, which promoted “individuality and diversification of the admissions systems by universities, through integration of the National Center Test and respective university examinations”. So although the NCT is used by most universities (i.e. Open System) and university departments, including those specialising in initial teacher education, each higher education institution (HEI) can choose to integrate the NCT with other selection filters. These filters are the “First-term” and “Second-term” exams, which are developed and administered by universities, with a prevailing focus on content knowledge. However, ITE programmes in the Open System commonly accept all candidates with the required NCT score, without these additional requirements (National Center for University Entrance Examinations, 2015_[2]).

Universities often frame first-term exams as heavily knowledge-focused, while Second-term exams can cover knowledge-based as well as qualitative and personal aspects. Second-term exams, which are scheduled one month after First-term exams, represent a second chance for those who failed First-term exams. These students usually apply to less competitive HEIs than the ones they applied in the First-term. Short essays and/or interviews are commonly used to gauge the motivation and attitudes of candidates, particularly for universities specialising in initial teacher education. However, knowledge-based examinations can also be administered at both stages.

In addition, there are alternative university selection filters in Japan: Recommendation-based and Admissions Office-based (AO). While Recommendation-based Admission allows university programmes to build the student body that is needed to attain the goals set by the university, AO applicants recommend themselves. For example, motivation to become a teacher can be an admission criterion in a university-based ITE programme, and applicants applying through AO must prove their intent. In both alternative admission

systems, some universities/university programmes place an additional requirement on the applicant to demonstrate a minimum level of academic skills, using the NCT score. Table 1 presents the different selection filters used to enter departments of education in Miyagi University and Shimane University.

Table 2. Selection filters for departments of education at Miyagi University of Education and Shimane University in Japan

| Miyagi University of Education (MUE) | Shimane University Faculty of Education |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Regular filter A (for applicants choosing MUE as their primary choice of university). NCT score and admission exams administered by MUE. | Regular filter A. NCT score and one additional paper-based examination administered by the university |
| Regular filter B (for applicants who were not admitted to their first university choice, i.e. not MUE). NCT score and interview to evaluate willingness to become a teacher | Regular filter B. NCT score and interview (option usually taken by those students who consider this university as their secondary choice of enrolment) |
| Recommendation-based filter. Recommendation letter submitted by high school; essay; group interview to evaluate the logical thinking ability, creativity and relational skills; and individual interview on motivation to become a teacher and communication skills. | Recommendation-based filter A. Essay and interview about motivation to be a teacher, plus NCT score for science education |
| | Recommendation-based filter B. Demonstration of art/athletic skills, essay and interview (NCT score not required) |
| | Admission Office-based filter. Essay and interview on motivation to be a teacher, with minimum required NCT score set by the programme. |
| | Other variations (3) of Recommendation Based Route A. |

Source: Miyagi University of Education, <http://www.miyakyo-u.ac.jp/about/outline/ct9.html>, retrieved 11 March 2018; Shimane University, <http://www.shimane-u.ac.jp/nyushi/information/application/>, retrieved 11 March 2018.

Competitive selection

In general, the most highly reputed HEIs attract the highest performing students on the basis of their NCT score. Individuals who wish to enrol in initial teacher education through the Open System or university departments specialising in ITE must submit their NCT score in the required subject area to their HEI of choice. Prospective students typically decide on the HEI by comparing their own test score with those of past applicants – and the reputation of the university or ITE programme.

Usually less competitive public universities require applicants to provide NCT scores on fewer and less fundamental subject areas than national universities and other competitive private universities. In addition, many private and less competitive universities do not require additional (First Term) examinations.

Those universities and university departments specialising in ITE also cap the number of students they admit annually. The competitive admission process thus serves as the bar for selecting quality candidates for ITE programmes.

Why is it a strength?

The OECD Review Team in its review of Japan from 5-9 September 2016 concluded that competitive selection coupled with diverse selection filters into ITE can be a strength because they allow for:

- *Customisation to suit local needs.* While the NCT demands a solid foundation of academic knowledge, TEIs in principle have the flexibility to tailor First- and

Second-term examinations to suit local needs, for example interviews focusing on motivation and personal characteristics of candidates. Such an approach seems warranted in light of sharp demographic changes, a dwindling student population and the operationalisation of a new national curriculum reform in Japan.

- *Strong subject knowledge.* The “Open system” allows people with strong subject knowledge to become teachers. There is a strong focus on subject knowledge, and an increased focus on pedagogical knowledge in education department programs. School leaders say that new teachers have a good foundational level of knowledge.

How could it be improved?

The OECD Review Team also noted that:

- *Nonetheless, the prevailing selection focus is on academic knowledge in high-stakes examinations,* which could overlook the importance of personal and other characteristics; valorise the focus on “rote learning” and “teaching to the test”; and incentivise students to attend academic *jukus* (after school courses) (Kittaka, 2013^[4]) Taking into account the variety and autonomy of ITE providers and programmes, this can result in ineffective selection and retention of candidates, who might be not motivated or suitable for teaching.
- *There are ongoing stakeholder discussions around national reform of university entrance examinations.* There is growing awareness of the need to harmonise and link multiple selection mechanisms along the ITP pathway (i.e. NCT, assessments of teacher candidates as part of ITE, certification, Teachers’ Employment examinations and the 1-year induction period). This trend is attuned with current national curriculum developments, teacher competency frameworks and ITE programme accreditation - to promote a continuum perspective of the teaching profession. For example, MEXT has established a Council for Reform on the System of Articulation of High Schools and Universities, which has developed practical proposals to promote alignment of university entrance exams with the reform of the school curriculum (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), 2015^[5]).

For more information

Kittaka, L. (2013), “Juku: an unnecessary evil or vital steppingstone to success?”, *The Japan Times*, ^[4]
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National Center for University Entrance Examinations (2015), *National Center for University Entrance Examinations* (Brochure), ^[2]
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2017-en>.

[3]