

Use of private English tests for Japanese university entrance exams delayed after education chief's gaffe

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The government decided Friday to put off the planned introduction of private-sector English proficiency tests as part of standardized university entrance exams next April, the education minister said a week after making a gaffe on the matter.

"We cannot recommend the current system to students with confidence," education minister Koichi Hagiuda said at a news conference.

He said the ministry will review the system for over a year, including whether private-sector tests should be used at all, and aim to introduce a new system for around the 2024 school year.

The current English-language component of the standardized entrance exam only assesses reading and listening comprehension, and the use of private-sector tests that also check writing and speaking was meant to evaluate students in a more comprehensive manner.

But critics have said the use of private-sector tests would be problematic in terms of access to testing locations and higher examination fees.

Hagiuda triggered an outcry on Oct. 24 when he said on a TV program that students should compete for university spots "in accordance with their (financial) standing," when asked about the fairness of using such tests.

The remark sparked criticism and calls for postponement from both ruling and opposition parties, as well as high school administrators. Hagiuda retracted his comment five days later.

However, Hagiuda maintained Friday that his controversial remark "did not affect the decision" to delay the exams, citing insufficient coordination with the private sector as an underlying factor.

In a statement posted on the ministry's website, the minister offered an apology, saying he was "very sorry" and pledged to "establish a system in which everyone can sit for exams with ease."

The opposition camp stepped up its criticism of Hagiuda after the private exams were postponed.

Jun Azumi, Diet affairs chief of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, said opposition efforts to postpone exams that "would have further widened the (nation's wealth) gap" paid off.

Japanese Communist Party chief Kazuo Shii demanded that the education minister step down.

“He fails to comprehend (the concept of) equal opportunity in education,” said Mizuho Fukushima, deputy head of the Social Democratic Party. “He’s unfit to be the minister of education.”

Applications for the IDs necessary to take the private exams were scheduled to be accepted from Friday morning, but Hagiuda said they will no longer be issued.

Under the proposed system, six private-sector institutions would have provided seven kinds of tests, including GTEC (Global Test of English Communication) and TOEFL, aimed at measuring English skills in four areas — reading, listening, writing and speaking — from April 2020.

Students would have been able to take the tests twice between April and December. Universities would have required certain scores to apply for admission or added points to their independent entrance exams, based on the private-sector test results.

The body that administers the entrance exams would have aggregated the test scores and provided them to the universities.

The National Association of Upper Secondary School Principals requested that use of the private-sector tests be delayed, arguing that they would discriminate against students in remote areas, and that support for disadvantaged households was limited.

The Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology Ministry had previously said it would consider support measures such as exam subsidies for low-income households but decided on postponement because the criticism did not subside.