

Where Is Japan Headed After the Earthquake?

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The devastating 9.0-magnitude earthquake on March 11, 2011 put Japan into chaos. It claimed the lives of 15,000 citizens, with an additional 10,000 still missing, and 120,000 in evacuation centers as their homes were lost or destroyed. The estimated economic loss is said to be between US\$200–300 billion and will have a serious effect on the developing northeast region of Japan. Countless aftershocks, in addition to the fear of the potentially catastrophic Fukushima Nuclear Plant, cause further worry and distress for the people in the affected area.

The earthquake also inflicted immense damage to higher education in Japan, especially in the area of internationalization. Supported by the Plan for 300,000 International Students by 2020, the higher education sector was in the process of internationalizing. The first project of the plan was Global 30, in which the government invested ¥4.1 billion to enable 13 core universities to lead the internationalization of higher education. Prior to Global 30, another five-year project, the Career Development Program for Foreign Students in Japan, had commenced and provided full scholarships, comprehensive business training, internships, and placement opportunities for

international students. Japan's universities might have been behind their rapidly internationalizing neighboring countries but was catching up step-by-step until March 11 this year.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE EARTHQUAKE

The immediate impact was a decrease in the number of current and prospective international students. At Tohoku University, the largest institution in the northeast region, 34 degree-seeking students withdrew after the earthquake. Forty-four out of 81 undergraduate exchange students discontinued their studies, 33 out of 43 scheduled to start in April, and one-third of the fall-semester applicants cancelled their study-abroad plan at Tohoku University.

The loss of students is only about 10 percent of the total international student population. Yet, the number is likely to continue to fall as the earthquake incident has even affected international student enrollment at universities as far as Kyoto, located 350 miles south of the Fukushima Nuclear Plant. The continued decrease of international students is a serious challenge for the Global 30 Project and Tohoku University, which planned to have 3,000 international students at the university by 2015.

THE LESSON WE LEARNED

Ironically, the earthquake is an opportunity for Japan to evaluate its level of internationalization. During these past few months after the earthquake, a series of

events have caused a question concerning Tohoku University's internationalization achievements. First, risk management standards could have been higher. The Tohoku region had been expecting a large earthquake for more than 10 years; and with a large number of international students from non-earthquake countries, the university should have included earthquake information during student orientation or handed out an earthquake booklet prepared by the local government.

Furthermore, after gathering at the designated evacuation area on campus, the university dismissed students without clear instructions on what to do next. International students had to find their way to the evacuation centers all by themselves.

Second, the university should have taken a more active role in collecting accurate information and sending out timely messages to international students. The students, alone in unfamiliar evacuation centers without updates on the earthquake and the nuclear-plant accident, were vulnerable to information from inaccurate sources. Their worried parents and friends, whose interpretations of the incidents were largely influenced by the media in their countries, urged the students to leave Japan immediately.

In addition, a chain mail has been encouraging students to do so. One e-mail, claiming to be from the Chinese government, instructed Chinese students to gather at the Niigata Airport, 200 miles away from Sendai where Tohoku University is located, to catch a government-chartered flight. Over 100 students rushed to Niigata Airport, with many standing in long lines to buy a bus ticket; some even took a taxi in a group and shared the US\$800 fare. Yet, no such flight existed. Those who could not afford full-fare

tickets checked themselves into an evacuation center near the airport until representatives of the Chinese Consulate came to their rescue.

Likewise, a clear difference has occurred between international students and domestic students, as well as Japanese citizens, in response to the incident. International students rushed from Japan with unfounded fears, which could have been prevented if the university immediately provided information to assist international students to make a competent decision.

COPING WITH THE CHALLENGES

While the university was not fully prepared for this megaeearthquake, it quickly overcame this mistake. The international office modified an online application system for exchange students to create a safety confirmation Web page, where international students could report their safety, status, and even plan for their studies. At Tohoku University, as of March 28, it was known that close to 1,000 students, two-third of international students, had been safely evacuated. By April 25, 86 percent reported their willingness to return before the new academic year would commence.

The Japanese government also came to provide support, by offering free airline tickets for government-sponsored scholarship students, who had gone home, to return to Japan and scholarships for self-funded international student at universities located in affected areas.

Partner institutions all over the globe have extended their support by increasing quota and accepting our students to their exchange programs, raising money for the

victims, or sending us encouraging messages. The alumni have sent us donations so that we can repair damaged buildings. This earthquake provided us with an opportunity to find strength in ourselves to recuperate, and we discovered the helping hands of our friends from all over the world.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The internationalization of Japanese universities might have been set back by this disaster for some years. We, however, should not be deterred. We should face up to the challenges and change the crisis into an opportunity. By reviewing and reevaluating Japan as a destination for quality higher education, we can identify our advantages as well as our shortcomings—including the effect of the earthquake—and rebuild our strategy from the ground up, in order to meet the increasing level of competition in higher education.

These strategies, however, should not be developed independently by institutions. There are many stakeholders whom we can involve—such as policymakers, industries, local communities, nonprofit organizations, and even members of the international community. Constructing a network or creating a consortium, where ideas and insights can be shared, will lead to building better strategies. Universities in the effected area, including Tohoku University, can act as a liaison for these diverse stakeholders. This is the first step toward restoration and a new era of internationalization.