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Institutional Responses to the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima Nuclear Crisis: The University of Sheffield

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Introduction

This article will reflect on a smaller scale institutional response to the Tōhoku earthquake: that of the University of Sheffield. It is hoped that an account of the actions taken by the University may prove instructive for scholars studying the processes of crisis management undertaken by academic institutions, as well as for planning by institutions and organisations with personnel overseas, such as corporations and NGOs. It will consider Sheffield's response in three stages: the first, from 11-15 March was run from within the School of East Asian Studies (SEAS) and focussed on immediate contact with students; between 16 March-10 April when response was managed and overseen by the university's Incident Management Team (IMT) in two phases: from 15-22 March focussed on supporting students with immediate offers of relocation; and from 23 March-10 April when most of the administration was devolved back to SEAS to consider the details of alternative provision, with the IMT providing oversight and support.

Background: The University of Sheffield

Sheffield is a major UK centre for Japanese Studies and runs one of the larger Japanese programmes in the country, with a compulsory Year Abroad in Japan taking place in students' third year of study. Students generally arrive in Japan in September, and return to the UK the following August. While there, they are widely dispersed between Sheffield's exchange partner universities, of which eleven are in the Tokyo area,¹ with an additional seventeen elsewhere in Japan.² This poses administrative challenges under normal circumstances; it also made dealing with the aftermath of the earthquake more complex as different students had a range of needs depending upon their locations.

In March 2011 I was sole Japan Year Abroad Coordinator in SEAS, with responsibility for overseeing the administration of the Year Abroad. Fortunately, prior to that point students had experienced only the types of issues which are to be: concerns over progress, homesickness, and occasional financial issues, for example; all of which could be dealt with by reassurance, or discussions with the partner university in question. The Tōhoku earthquake, therefore, was the first time in departmental memory that we had had a significant number of students caught up

¹ There were only ten Tokyo-based exchange universities in 2011, as an exchange agreement with the University of Tokyo was not finalised until 2013.

² See <http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/seas/undergraduates/courses/jstudy> for a complete list.

in a natural disaster simultaneously. The rapidly changing situation on the ground necessitated prompt decision-making, and liaison between the department, which had direct contact with the students, and the ability to monitor the news from Japanese sources, and the university's central administration, who had to set policy and take the actual decisions. The nature of this process, and how the university's response developed, can best be illustrated by a chronological account of the month following 11 March 2011.

Phase One Response: Contact with Students

I awoke on 11 March 2011 to news of the earthquake and tsunami which had struck Japan several hours earlier. SEAS had twenty-nine undergraduate students on exchange that year³ and, while there were none in the Tōhoku region and thus likely to have been directly endangered, given the reports of the extent of the damage, I was concerned to ensure that we knew they were all safe and well. This was also a concern for students' families – by about 08:30, the department had already had its first call from a concerned parent. Our priority was, therefore, to get in contact with both students and partner universities as quickly as possible, and to provide reassurance and contact information for students' families. This resulted in all students being emailed at 09:27, asking them to confirm that they were safe and well. A report on our current knowledge of the situation, and a contact telephone number was uploaded to the departmental homepage by 10:00. Regular updates to this information were made throughout the day, with the departmental contact number being replaced by that of the university when the departmental office closed for the weekend.

The response from the students was good, and evidence that even in the aftermath of such a severe event, Japan's communications infrastructure was relatively undisturbed: 23 students had contacted us by the early evening of 11 March; information on a further two was received directly from their host universities, and a further three contacted us on 12 March. This left only one student unaccounted for, but one of his classmates contacted us over the weekend and reported that the student 'had been seen out at a party' the day before, and so was obviously well. By 13 March, therefore, we knew that all our students were unharmed, and not in any immediate danger. The timing of the earthquake was fortuitous, in that it took place in the spring break between Japanese academic semesters. This meant that a number of students who were placed in Tokyo, and who might have been most directly affected, had returned to the UK to visit family, while others were travelling elsewhere. This reduced the number about whom we had to have immediate concerns.

Simultaneously, however, with reports in the British media about food shortages and power outages in Tokyo, as well as the deteriorating and unpredictable situation at the nuclear power plant in Fukushima, by Monday, 14 March, the university had fielded several calls from parents, asking for advice about whether their children should make urgent arrangements to return home. It was at this point that the university's central administration became directly involved, with discussions between myself and the Head of International Student Support about what the best advice to give would be, as well as what measures the university should

³ There were an additional three undergraduates from the Chemistry department, on a separate exchange programme at Okayama University.

be putting in place to aid Japanese students in Sheffield, who would naturally be concerned about friends and family back home. This was also when the department began to receive requests from the media for comment about the situation and staff members were interviewed for news reports.

The advice we provided on 14 March was that there was no immediate need for students to consider returning to the UK, or leaving Tokyo – this was in line with the Foreign Office advice at the time. However, with the situation at Fukushima still apparently deteriorating on 15 March, the university took the decision to activate its emergency procedures and establish an Incident Management Team (IMT). This group drew together people from academic and administrative departments in order that decisions and actions could be taken quickly, and the university’s senior management be kept informed.

Phase Two Response: Fukushima and Relocation within Japan

The IMT was chaired by the university’s Head of Student Services, and had the following membership and functions:

Section	Role
Student Services – Taught Programmes	Consider the impact on students’ studies, and any necessary regulatory changes
Student Services – International Office	Oversight of the relationship between Sheffield and its partner universities
Student Services – International Support	Organise support for Japanese students in Sheffield, and contacts between the university and students’ families
Student Services – Financial Support	Consider budgeting and financial provisions for any decisions taken by the IMT
Union of Students	Act as a channel of communication with the general student body
Accommodations Office	Consider arrangements for emergency accommodation provision, should students evacuate from Japan
School of East Asian Studies	Provide expert knowledge about the situation in Japan; act as channel of communication directly with affected students
Chemistry	Act as channel of communication directly with affected students
English Language Teaching Centre	Act as channel of communication with Japanese Student presently in Sheffield
Media Relations	Coordinate the university’s public statements about its response
Corporate Communications	Coordinate the university’s reports on its actions to staff and students
Security Services	Monitor, respond and report on any potential security risks to the university –

	this was mainly a concern at the possibility of environmental demonstrations at the university's nuclear research facilities.
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The IMT first convened in the early afternoon of 16 March. Prior to that, SEAS members met to discuss whether any of the lessons learned from the SARS outbreak in 2002-03, and which had impacted on students studying in China, were applicable to the situation. The general consensus was that the situations were significantly different, although there might be benefits from coordination with other UK-based academic institutions, should a significant number of students return to the UK.

At the first meeting of the IMT, our best judgement on the information available was that students were safest remaining where they were, until there was a change in the FCO advice. Decisions were taken to begin contingency planning, to set up a dedicated IMT mailing list and online space, and share personal and mobile telephone numbers. All of this was intended to allow communication to be made quickly between IMT members, and any decisions taken outside of formal meetings to be conveyed quickly. This was required that evening, because the FCO advice changed to advise British nationals to 'consider leaving Tokyo'; students were informed of this via email, and further steps considered at the next IMT meeting.

It was at this meeting at 12:00 noon on 17 March that, in the light of the FCO advice, the decision was taken to offer all students in eastern Japan the opportunity to relocate temporarily to Kyoto until the situation in Tokyo became more stable, and/or to return to the UK via commercial flight. The Vice-Chancellor confirmed that the costs of this would be met from central university funds in the first instance. We were fortunate in that a member of SEAS academic staff, Dr Peter Matanle, was already in Kyoto as head of the Sheffield Dōshisha Centre, and was able to assist with this, but it was decided that I should fly to Japan as quickly as possible to coordinate events there. Simultaneously, all students' In Case of Emergency (ICE) contacts were telephoned by staff from student services to keep them informed, and offer further support. Information was also placed on the university homepage, with links for contacts with the university's critical support team. Other sections of the university also stepped up their contingency planning for student returns, and a briefing was prepared for the University Executive Board.

By the time of the next IMT meeting, at 08:30 the following morning, I was about to board my flight to Japan, and the university's response shifted into another phase, with Peter and myself dealing with the students' immediate situations in Japan, and the IMT membership dealing with issues in the UK. The main developments on 18 March were: taking steps to provide necessary emotional support to Japanese students in Sheffield via the Chaplaincy Service; coordinating with the student union which was planning fundraising activities for the earthquake's victims; requesting SEAS to consider alternative provision options for students returning from Japan and unable to go back; financial planning, as well as considering whether the university's costs could be recouped from its insurers; and drafting a media policy and statement. The key concerns at this stage, however, were still the provision of immediate support to students.

I arrived at Osaka's Kansai International Airport on 19 March. By this time, only one of the students in Tokyo had decided to relocate to Kyoto, one of the Chemistry students had telephoned from Okayama seeking reassurance, and a further student had returned to the UK independently. That day I made telephone contact with all the students in Japan, enquired about their situation, and reiterated the university's offer of support. All of them felt unworried about their personal safety and were more concerned reassuring families back in the UK, given the sensationalist tone of much of the British media coverage.

Late on 19 March the British embassy began the distribution of iodine to British nationals. The following morning, the one student who had come from Tokyo to Kyoto decided to return home, and I made the arrangements. All of the others reiterated their determination to remain in Japan – one was even looking forward to her family coming for a visit. Simultaneously, one of the Chemistry students came to Kyoto for an overnight stay, as many of her friends from other countries had promptly returned home.

The inconsistency of national and institutional policies was to become an issue the following day, when we had the first queries from students about why all of their American or German friends had left. The solution was to explain that there were different legal frameworks, as well as varying government advice, but that as a UK institution, Sheffield would be guided by the FCO. In order to provide emotional and psychological support to students, arrangements were made for email and/or telephone contact with the university's counselling service.

The IMT decided that day to make one further call to students' ICE contacts to make clear what support the university was able to provide, but that there would be no further emails to students, as the feeling was that as much as could possibly be done had been done. From immediate crisis management, therefore, the focus shifted to dealing with the contingencies of student return, and what needed to be done to maintain provision should anyone not go back to Japan.

Phase Three Response: Alternative Provision

Over the next few days, the situation in Japan began to normalise, and partner universities began to make announcements about their arrangements for commencing their spring semesters. Nevertheless, the fifteen students at universities in the Tokyo area were offered the choice between remaining where they were, relocating to an alternative university in the west of Japan, or returning for alternative provision in the UK. Most promptly indicated that they would return to their current universities, and by 28 March there were only two students undecided. This necessitated discussions over the best form for alternative provision, with an intensive diploma course being run at SOAS seeming like the best option. This involved discussions and budgeting for exceptional accommodation arrangements.

By 6 April, however, there remained only one student who had returned to the UK and not gone back to Japan, largely as a result of parental pressure. Once the FCO guidance was revised to indicate that there were no obstacles to travel to Tokyo, the student overcame these objections, and indicated on 10 April that he would return to Japan. At this point the IMT

was officially stood down, and there was a brief exercise to consider the lessons learnt from crisis.

Conclusion

From the outset, the university saw its role as offering students advice and support – whether emotional, informational, or financial – but that it was students' own responsibility to take decisions, and that it did not have the ability or authority to instruct students to take any particular course of action. This position was at variance with that adopted by some UK, and other, universities, but reflected the university's concern to treat its students as adults.

On an institutional level, the earthquake, and the experience of it, stimulated further developments. Departmentally, it led to the drawing up of an emergency plan for dealing with future crises. By their very nature, these tend to be unique and require ad hoc responses, so rather than focus on details, the emphasis was on outlining a process to be followed, roles for individual office holders such as Year Abroad Coordinators, Head of Department, departmental web-manager and so forth. The plan is predicated on the assumption that a serious crisis would result in the formation of an IMT, which would take the essential decisions, but also lays out the necessary communication routes between the department and central administration prior to this happening. Fortunately, in the years since 2011, the plan has only had to be activated once, during a brief period of heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula, and was swiftly stood down again as the situation improved, although elements of it were utilised during the MERS outbreak in South Korea in 2015. Neither of these situations required an IMT, however.

In the months following the earthquake, Student Services also established a group bringing together staff from a range of central and academic departments to consider what to do in a range of crisis scenarios and refine the university's responses. SEAS took part in this group to provide advice on the practicalities of different actions, based on our experience of dealing with Tōhoku. The scenarios ranged from natural disasters to more man-made ones, such as students being caught up in armed conflict, or victims of a major terrorist incident. A key conclusion of this exercise was the need for clarity of communication between the centre and departments, and making sure that both individual members of staff and students knew who to contact, and how, in case they needed critical support. This, in turn, led to refinements in documentation, and to the briefings delivered to students prior to their going on Year Abroad placements. This is something which is now kept actively under review, with centrally agreed information contained in all Year Abroad briefings.

The Tōhoku earthquake was an unprecedented event, and posed a significant challenge to the university's personnel and processes. There is no doubt that we were fortunate to be spared the worst outcome of students being injured, or killed; and, in the end, did not have to make alternative provision to enable students to continue their studies outside of Japan.

Nevertheless, the university's response, which was composed of the actions and decisions of a large number of individual members of staff, was characterised by professionalism, and a focus on ensuring first the students' physical wellbeing and security, second, their emotional and psychological security, and finally, safeguarding their educational opportunities, and I am

confident that any future crisis will be approached in the same manner and with the same priorities.