

Disaster Distress: Navigating an Earthquake in Japan

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Tags

Crisis-Management; Education Abroad; Leadership and Strategy; Management and Operations; University/Higher Education

Setting

On March 11, 2011, an earthquake with the magnitude of 9.0 struck the north east coast of Japan. It was one of the largest earthquakes that had been recorded in global history which resulted in a devastating tsunami and accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant ¹. University X, a private institution in the United States, had five students studying abroad at a partner university in Tokyo, as well as seven students bound to start their study abroad program in Tokyo that next week. The Education Abroad office at University X is composed of one Director and two coordinators.

Case

The Director of Education Abroad for University X, was tasked with making pivotal decisions immediately after the earthquake in Japan. Following University X's risk management protocols, the Director reached out to all of the students studying abroad in Japan to make sure they were safe. Fortunately, all of the students were accounted for. Although the aftershocks were over, there was growing concern from the students and parents about the nuclear plant accident. After researching recommendations from the United States Government, the Director discovered that the students were far enough from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant that they were not in danger from radiation

¹ Nohara, M. (2011). Impact of the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami on health, medical care and public health systems in Iwate Prefecture, Japan, 2011. *Western Pacific Surveillance & Response Journal*, 2(4).

exposure. However, other possible safety risks following the earthquake, such as fires and power outages, influenced the Director to mandate that all students come home as soon as possible. Education Abroad Coordinators at University X worked with the students in order to get them on the next possible flight home and also spoke with parents about their concerns for their children's safety. University X assured students and parents that they would be refunded for any aspects of the program that were being cut short due to the earthquake. University X also worked closely with their partner university in Tokyo to make sure that the students were still able to complete their classes in an online format.

The United States issued a travel warning for Japan, which led the Director to cancel the upcoming program in Tokyo. There were seven students bound to start classes within the next week and two of whom were already in Japan traveling before the program started. University X apologized for the cancellation and promised to refund students for all program costs. Following recommendations by the United States travel advisory, the Director of University X sent out a letter to all students and parents affirming that the decision to cancel the program in Tokyo was in the best interest of the students' safety. As an alternative for these students, the Education Abroad office set up a partnership with a well-regarded institution in the United States that would enable this cohort of students to take Japanese classes there for the next semester. This would allow students the opportunity to experience a different educational setting and provide the desired Japanese classes. Although not all students chose this option, it provided a way for University X to offer an educational opportunity focused on Japanese language and culture.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Debrief: What do you think the Director of the Education Abroad office did well in managing programs after the earthquake? What could they have done differently?
- What training and protocols should be in place for staff at all levels to prepare for emergencies? What preparation do you think the education abroad office can do to help students be prepared to handle natural disasters in countries that have a high level of risk?
- How should have University X evaluated when programs in Japan could resume? What considerations should University X and their partner university in Tokyo have kept in mind when resuming programs?
- Imagine the Director could not get a hold of a student in the disaster zone. What would have been the best next steps? How could they have worked to locate students?
- Who were the different stakeholders involved in this case? How did those relationships affect the crisis management process?
- How should the Education Abroad have supported students as they returned back to the United States? Are the practices different when the reason for evacuation is a natural disaster as opposed to other crises?