



University volunteer programs for post-disaster recovery: The case of post-tsunami Japan

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Abstract

The concept and practice of student volunteerism is active in various university settings worldwide. It aims to engage students in society outside the classroom to promote their sense of social responsibility as citizens of their respective countries. The paper explores and discusses the post-disaster volunteer programs launched by three Japanese universities after the 2011 tsunami. It is based on a qualitative research conducted through case study with a meso level analysis. In-depth interviews and focus group discussion were implemented for data collection. The data were analysed using content analysis approach to identify university volunteer programs development. The research shows the emergence of actively developed student volunteer programs in the early stages following the disaster. The volunteer programs incorporate volunteer recruitment, project identification and implementation, network development and extension, training and capacity building for student volunteers, and a platform for self-reflection by student volunteers. Common issues, strengths and weaknesses among the three cases of the respective universities are discussed in detail. In conclusion, volunteer tourism is considered a potentially important mechanism for post-disaster support programs.

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Introduction

Student volunteer programs exist in various university settings worldwide as higher education institutions perform roles beyond providing classroom education and knowledge development. These programs are implemented in order to link student activities with concerns about the society in which they live through volunteerism. As regards student volunteer programs launched by universities for disaster management, roles of universities span all phases of the disaster cycle, with particular focus placed on the essential role during impact and emergency phase, in addition to risk reduction strategies, preparedness, and mitigation. The role of universities in

disaster management includes disaster education and research as well as relief and support for the affected communities (Ahmad, 2007).

One case study of university students involved in a post-disaster volunteer program of interest is that of the Japanese tsunami in 2011. The Great East Japan Earthquake, with a magnitude of 9.0, generated a massive and devastating tsunami that descended upon the Tohoku region on March 11, 2011. This led to catastrophic destruction in the coastal areas and farmland in Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima, Ibaraki, and Chiba prefectures, with more than 18,500 people affected by the disaster. Major physical damage and destruction included structural damage and collapse, fires, and flood crises. Due to the massive destruction caused by the tsunami, many volunteers travelled to the devastated areas in the Tohoku region, volunteering in relief work for tsunami victims and communities. Some volunteers were individuals who travelled to the affected area by themselves, while many others were

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involved in post-disaster volunteer programs launched by different organizations. In the six months following the disaster, a total of over one million volunteers, mostly Japanese citizens, travelled to Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima to provide assistance in relief and recovery activities. This active volunteer response also came about following on from the power of social media feeds, blogs and websites, where volunteers described their volunteer work, motivation, experiences, and shared photos from the field. McMorran (2017) provided examples of these digital forms including websites from Kobe University's Tohoku Volunteer Bus Project, Peace Boat's Voice from the Ground, and Tasukeai Japan. Among the different volunteer programs, Japanese universities played an important role in organizing student volunteer programs for post-disaster recovery. These programs created an education-related pathway to raise student awareness about social concerns while also providing support for post-disaster recovery. This idea was also addressed by Brundiers (2018) through the dual concepts of 'visiting the world'—for field visits so that students immerse themselves in real-world recovery processes—and 'engaging with the world'—by contributing their services.

This paper provides a qualitative research approach via case study analysis to discuss student volunteer programs in post-disaster situations from three different university student volunteer programs. Common issues, strengths and weaknesses among the three cases are analysed. These experiences can be educational for other institutions seeking to further integrate volunteer programs for disaster recovery and volunteer tourism field trips into educational systems.

Literature Review

Volunteering, defined by Whittaker, McLenna, and Handmer (2015) refers to activities that are non-obligatory, undertaken for the benefit of others and society, that are unpaid. They categorize different types of volunteering into informal volunteering, emergent volunteering, extending volunteering, and even a new mode of volunteering called digital volunteering. As the normal disaster management lifecycle comprises mitigation, response, and recovery, Whittaker et al. (2015) asserted that volunteerism has tended to be defined more broadly in the disaster management context, focusing on volunteer activities and outcomes rather than volunteers' characteristics and motivations. McMorran (2017) observed that when disaster strikes, people may donate money, food, or clothing to disaster victims, while many travel to the disaster zone to participate in volunteer relief and recovery activities. Post-disaster volunteers are seen as selflessly rushing to the disaster-affected areas, even risking personal injury, to aid in relief and recovery efforts both individually and through disaster relief organizations. Post-disaster volunteers are normally engaged in searching for survivors, providing the basic needs for survivors such as food and medicine, helping with recovery efforts such as cleaning rubble or rebuilding homes, and also listening to survivors' stories and providing moral support. On volunteerism in Japan, Avenell (2012) found that volunteer activities after

natural disasters first gained prominence after the Kobe Earthquake in 1995, under the term '*saigai borantia gan nen*'. Matsuda (2016) observed that at the time of the Tohoku Earthquake, groups previously formed in response to the Kobe Earthquake, as well as newly founded organizations and thousands of unaffiliated individuals, participated in helping survivors, clearing inundated houses, and, in the longer term, contributed to the community-rebuilding processes.

Considering the tourism sector plays a significant role in disaster management, it is integrated into the disaster recovery cycle as a supporting program, assisting in rebooting the local economy and providing social support for victims such as positive stimulation, short-term psychological remedies, and empowerment for the community (Muskat, Blackman, & Nakanishi, 2014), which appeared as 'volunteer tourism'. Wearing (2004) also highlighted the meaning of volunteer tourism in terms of learning in the form of academic knowledge, the development of personal knowledge, self-confidence, independence, cultural awareness and social abilities. This was affirmed by the earlier study of McGehee and Santos (2004) exploring how participation in volunteer tourism influenced social movement activity as a result of the establishment and expansion of social networks and consciousness-raising experiences.

According to McMorran (2017), 'volunteer tourism' in Japan refers to short-term overseas working holidays; however, during the 2011 tsunami disaster, there were 'tie-ups combining volunteer activities and regional tourism promotion' that would transport and deliver volunteers from places such as Tokyo to the disaster zone in the Tohoku region. He stated that the combining of volunteering with volunteer tourism in the Tohoku disaster zone created a complex volunteer infrastructure that not only facilitated post-disaster volunteerism, but more problematically, circumscribed volunteers and essentially transformed them into voluntourists. This shift toward volunteer tourism suggests leveraging tourism is the most effective mechanism for disaster recovery. It is a consequence of questions from prospective volunteers asking 'How can I help?', with one option being to join a 'voluntour', such as a support tour. In particular, voluntourism was seen as a possible option when, over time, as construction firms and other experts took over the large-scale clean-up and rebuilding tasks, the number of volunteers steeply declined. Forgash (2011) identified news coverage concerning volunteerism and volunteer tourism in Tohoku as having been equally inconsistent, characterized mainly by sentimentalized community interest stories and first-hand accounts penned by journalists who had participated in volunteer trips. One of the activities—called 'story-telling tours'—serves to ensure that the disaster-affected community and the events leading to their circumstances are not forgotten. This type of tour is often a guided tour, showcasing devastated locations and the lives of the disaster survivors. Muskat et al. (2014) observed another stimulating aspect, whereby voluntourist and residential events contributed positively to healing while at the same time galvanized a coming together within the community to build a collective approach for energizing community members to transition into the next phase of life after the disaster.

Methodology

This paper resulted from a qualitative research study exploring the student volunteer programs after the 2011 tsunami disaster implemented by different Japanese universities in Kyoto. Target universities were selected using the criteria of having active volunteer programs, engaging in tsunami disaster relief, being of reasonable distance for traveling to the tsunami-affected areas, and a willingness to provide information for the research. Consequently, three Japanese universities were selected: Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto Sangyo University, and Ryukoku University.

A qualitative research design was adopted for research implementation through case study in meso level. Data collection was conducted through analysis of secondary data and semi-structured interviews with 12 key informants comprising four supervisors of student volunteer centers from different universities and eight former student volunteers involved in tsunami disaster relief programs by traveling to affected areas and volunteering in relief activities. The semi-structured interviews with 12 key informants were conducted in order to obtain information on student volunteer programs, strategic management of volunteer centers for post-disaster relief, volunteer activities, student volunteer motivations, expectations and experiences. Identifying the limitations and the potential to develop student volunteer programs and volunteer tourism programs for post-disaster recovery were discussed with the key informants during the interviews. Collected data were analyzed through content analysis to identify three major states for university program for volunteer programs including recruitment, project identification, and implementation. This identifies the reasons the participants chose to be involved in, and their expectations of the post-disaster volunteer programs. The experiences and benefits gained from volunteering were also discussed and analyzed using a phenomenological approach.

Results and Discussion

This paper focuses on volunteer programs in the post-disaster period. Ritsumeikan University and its Service Learning Center represents an *'active volunteer center with new programs for post-disaster recovery'*, while the recent establishment of the Volunteer Support Center at Kyoto Sangyo University represents an *'in-progress volunteer center with new programs for post-disaster recovery'*. A diverse and active student volunteer center is represented by the Volunteer Center at Ryukoku University with its long history of volunteer program development. This university volunteer program can be characterized as an *'effective volunteer center with active programs in post-disaster recovery'*, which will be further discussed below. Regarding these three different Japanese universities and their respective volunteer programs, the findings clearly show that each case began the same with formal formation of the student volunteer center to provide a core function of the university to organize, collaborate, respond to, and provide support for disaster recovery. These institutions created a clear plan and process for volunteer campaigns, volunteer recruitment, volunteer project

identification and implementation, network development and extension, training and capacity-building for student volunteers, and even a platform for self-reflection by the student volunteers. These processes were supported by the universities as observed and documented in this study. Aoki and Ito (2014) asserted the importance of the establishment of a volunteer center for post-disaster operated by universities. Universities are considered to have diverse knowledge and expertise that can aid in mobilizing the responsiveness of a community in the event of a disaster. Comprehensive in its capabilities, a university can contribute significantly in all phases of disaster cycles: pre-disaster preparedness, disaster response, and disaster recovery.

Collaborations among universities to develop and implement volunteer programs also occurred. For example, Ritsumeikan University coordinated with Ryukoku University to set up an Office for Post-Disaster Support. Moreover, it coordinated with Tohoku Gakuin University to implement volunteer programs in the affected areas and also collaborated with a Taiwanese University to send a multinational team of student volunteers. In the case of Kyoto Sangyo University, with the recent establishment of a volunteer program, it looked for support and elected to work with Ritsumeikan University to organize volunteer trips to the disaster zone. These three cases confirmed that the network creation among universities helped to develop and mobilize volunteer programs when such universities were not familiar with the planning and operations of disaster recovery programs and locations. Collective action among society members occurred following the tsunami disaster which is a positive sign for society in that there are meaningful linkages among different society members: university students with the local community; students to students; university to university; and university to society, as was apparent in these three cases. This was supported by various studies (Aldrich, 2012; Dynes, 2006; Ganapati, 2012) that the community's resources, organizational capacities, and social capital can help to increase the ability of communities to recover after disaster through collective action. As highlighted by Aoki and Ito (2014), it is the comprehensive strength that makes universities such an important part of society, and even in disaster situations they are expected to take a leading role in disaster response aftermath especially in terms of knowledge and expertise mobilization and volunteer motivation. This can be considered a strength or positive attribute of the implementation of university volunteer programs in a post-disaster setting. In particular, the case of Ryukoku University demonstrates how the university provides active learning opportunities for students and extends that to service learning for societal benefit. This is an example where not only was a volunteer program created to operate in the disaster zone, but there was also the by product of primary volunteer activities such as awareness campaigns for tsunami victims and the setting up of charity fairs and festivals for fundraising as an extension of the volunteer program, which benefitted different sectors and geographic locales. This finding is supported by McGehee and Santos (2004) in their exploration of how participation in volunteering influenced social movement activity and the expansion of social networks and facilitated consciousness-raising experiences.

The analysis of the three cases also highlighted the key issues for program design that require careful consideration by administrators in terms of the organizational aspects of student volunteer programs for post-disaster settings. One important issue to be considered for volunteer programs, especially for post-disaster areas, is the safety and security of student volunteers and staff travelling to and operating in the disaster zone. This is actually the first consideration volunteer programs should make as it was prominent in all three cases outlined in this study. The specific attention of the volunteer center in charge of the volunteer program and implementation is required, especially in times of disaster when there are various sectors engaged in response and recovery. Universities seem to have an advantage in this area and are more effective at considering the safety ramifications of their programs as they already have an institutional management structure in place. Post-disaster volunteer programs can be developed through collaboration with various partner universities to reap the benefits of resource pooling, collective action, and knowledge and capacity support—as occurred in all three of the observed cases. This was particularly evident in the case of Ryukoku University, which clearly provided significant assistance to the organization of the volunteer program design at partner universities as desire grew among the student populations to participate in post-disaster recovery. Faculty members, staff, and prospective student volunteers held a brainstorming session to identify effective volunteer activities and to increase engagement and commitment. Moreover, the volunteer activity not only focused on labor-related tasks such as clearing and cleaning the affected areas, but also aimed to raise awareness about social concerns, safety and security, and sensitive issues in the affected areas. The diverse knowledge base of university professors and other experts was also incorporated to broaden participants' perceptions, knowledge, and understanding of the situation before going to the disaster zone. This set of processes is described as 'volunteer orientation' in all three cases, marking it as an important stage of volunteering in post-disaster contexts.

Adding the volunteer program as a for credit course for students also increased student involvement in the program, creating a 'win-win' situation for both students and the volunteer program. Self-reflection opportunities and experience-sharing sessions are definitely a fundamental component of these programs based on the findings from the three cases. One student volunteer commented that *"I joined the experience-sharing session from former volunteers. Some of them were my seniors at school. They showed their pictures of clearing the debris. They worked so hard to clean the disaster area, so I decided to join a volunteer program. I want to help too"* (volunteer student, Faculty of Law). In order to increase the utility of the experience-sharing sessions, another student volunteer stated that *"In the session, I had the feeling that volunteer students worked as a team to help the community, not just for self-satisfaction. I found this very inspiring to be part of a team – a volunteer with meaning"* (volunteer student, Faculty of History). The session was found to be an important mechanism for stimulating students to become involved in volunteer programs, especially for post-disaster recovery where former student volunteers shared their experiences on site with photos, as well as sharing the facts on the ground.

The major constraints found in the three cases were: identifying suitable volunteer projects to meet the needs of the victims in the disaster area; questions about the future continuation of student volunteer projects; financial support to sustain volunteer programs; evaluation of the volunteer activity outcome besides self-reflection; and the time constraints of the active students involved in the volunteer programs.

The findings from these three cases confirmed that students initially became involved in the volunteer program because they thought it was a means to achieve personal growth, raise awareness of social issues, make meaningful connections with the disaster victims or disaster area, and even obtain credits for their study as in the case of Ritsumeikan University and Kyoto Sangyo University. Although Ryukoku did not give university credit courses for involvement in the volunteer program, students were already actively involved due to the efficacy of its volunteer center in motivating students to participate. The major benefits gained from being involved in the volunteer program, especially in the post-disaster context, included increased self-confidence, self-contentment, self-development, and self-satisfaction at the prospect of being a good citizen.

Moreover, former student volunteers from the three cases mentioned that involvement in the volunteer program helped to make their portfolio more attractive to potential employers for job applications. This was affirmed by an analysis of the self-reflections of student volunteers in the three cases. This finding is congruent with the findings by McMorran (2017) on the motivations of post-disaster volunteers being altruistic, with a possible personal connection to the area or survivors, an aim to assist survivors, and also a desire to feel solidarity with survivors and to learn from them. Therefore, it seems that the reasons for involvement and the benefits gained from involvement in such volunteer programs in these cases are sometimes for self-benefit and self-satisfaction rather than social considerations as a whole.

As concerns of the role of the educational system in promoting student volunteerism in post-tsunami Japan, this has been shown to be an effective dual service and learning process for students to engage in real-world experiences. Again, Brundiers (2018) supports this, mentioning the concept of "Visit the World" during normal and disaster times through activities outside of the classroom as service learning projects to become part of the local community of practice. Moreover, his concept of "Engaging with the World" also underlines the fact that volunteer students engage in collaborative partnerships with stakeholders to develop and implement plans for post-disaster recovery, which are direct experiences in real situations for them to learn from.

However, it is vital to design training and orientation program content emphasizing the core questions of 'What is a disaster, really?' and 'How do we, as an educational institution, respond?' As in all three cases, they are primarily concerned with trying to identify their roles and responsibilities in times of disaster—not just provide academic service but also organize volunteer experiences that serve the communities in need. This study shows clearly that the educational system and tertiary educational institutions in particular are capable of conducting post-disaster recovery in addition to their more common roles of knowledge and research development.

Universities, as highly organized bureaucratic institutions, have clear management structure and operational logistics functionality as well as diversified fields of knowledge that are fairly important during disaster recovery. They also have the manpower both for planning and implementing volunteer activities. Universities have experience organizing field trips or study trips for activities that are linked with a destination. They can contribute to the public good in the form of both knowledge and services, and they are well regarded and highly trusted within most societies. Involving educational institutions in real world experience can help provide the opportunity for students to gain hands-on experience and knowledge development that are highly applicable to a diverse array of real-world situations. However, the student volunteer programs for post-disaster recovery that were launched by different universities have not yet identified any criteria or mechanisms for which to evaluate the efficacy of their results. These types of evaluation systems undoubtedly need to be developed in future.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on results and discussion, all three cases reveal the strengths of networking and collaborations among universities in organizing and operating volunteer programs. This in turn creates efficiency by pooling the resources for volunteer program implementation and generating collective actions for society. The student volunteers, even if they started their volunteering activities based on self-interest and self-development, grew in developing a sense of responsibility to their country and people. Awareness-raising is a major issue that universities trying to promote volunteering are constantly engaged in. The Japanese government enacted a policy to offer a one credit course for volunteer activity which increased the awareness and willingness of students to become involved in volunteer programs. This paper emphasized that the educational system can help to promote interest in social concerns among students so that they may develop to be good citizens contributing positively to society in the future. When considering the Tohoku area as a destination for volunteer tourism in the post-disaster context, the unique features and distinguishing characteristics of the area should be identified. This is to attract tourists, and not only volunteers. Such a volunteer tourism program could provide an alternative source of income generation for local people who were tsunami victims to rebuild their lives after devastating losses. As regards the number of volunteer programs integrated into the tourism sector, few volunteer tourism programs are currently and commercially available in Japan. Normally, these two terms are conceptually separated from each other based on different objectives, activities, and targets. Consequently, there is still much ambiguity surrounding the idea of how to link volunteer programs with tourism development, particularly for disaster-affected areas such as in Sendai. Nevertheless, there was a pilot trip in which student volunteers went to Sendai to perform volunteer work and also participate in a walking tour around the area. This model might serve as an example of the initial development of volunteer tourism, starting from student volunteer travelers in the form of field trip studies, after volunteer work has begun

in the area. This could later be developed into volunteer tourism, targeting university students and then made available to other sectors of the population. However, volunteer tourism should maintain a critical focus on learning about the place and the people at the destination. Taking these points into account, volunteer tourism, especially for university students, should be designed and developed with concern for the well-being of the local destination and populace rather than for receiving personal experience and satisfaction. Besides providing effective student volunteer programs as mentioned above, universities have also provided volunteer tourism in post-disaster contexts for students. Engaging in awareness raising, designing sensitive programs for volunteer activities, and sight-seeing to learn on the ground also help to create understanding and commitment to volunteerism while providing an enjoyable itinerary. Experience-sharing and reflection from the trip is dually important to get information to enable program improvement as well as to promote the program and its core idea of volunteer tourism. A combination of humanitarian, ethical, and cultural concerns must be integrated into the design of the volunteer tourism programs.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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