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大震災、国づくりの転機
日本再生 大学に使命

Turning the Great East Japan Earthquake into an opportunity to rebuild the nation
The rebirth of Japan, a mission for universities

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Thousands of precious lives have been lost in the Great East Japan Earthquake. I would like to offer my deep condolences and heartfelt sympathy to the victims of this disaster who are still suffering even today. Confronted by the unimaginable scale of this destruction, I have been contemplating since March 11, what role we as universities are supposed to play, and what we need to do at this critical juncture.

The massive earthquake has triggered numerous aftershocks, accidents at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, power shortages and blackouts, and disruption in transportation services, with far-reaching consequences for Japan's entire social system. The crisis is far from over, and the situation remains uncertain. Universities in Japan are struggling with how to respond to this unprecedented challenge.

In the light of this situation and by way of example, I would like to discuss measures we have taken at the University of Tokyo. By presenting our responses and our sense of mission, I hope this short essay will help provide members of the university community with another perspective on the concerted efforts we can make with the victims striving to overcome this disaster.

As a matter of course, the University first tried its utmost to confirm the safety of all students, academic and administrative staff. Despite some damage to facilities on our campuses in Tokyo and neighboring Chiba prefecture, we quickly managed to establish the safety of all our University members on these campuses. However, the University has other campuses and research facilities across Japan, including in the Tohoku region, which has sustained the most serious damage. The University's International Coastal Research Center, located in Otsuchi, Iwate Prefecture, near the epicenter of the earthquake, was severely damaged by the tsunami. Fortunately, six days after the earthquake, we were able to confirm the safety of all students and staff members.

As an organization, large-scale universities with many faculties and graduate schools are unsuited for collecting and transmitting information in an organized and unified

manner. The University has established the Headquarters for Disaster Countermeasures for the first time in its history and in accordance with the basic principles of risk management. This organization gathers and communicates relevant information via a designated section of our website on an as-needed basis, including information in English for international students. Moreover, the University has announced and implemented emergency measures, such as changing the dates of make-up examinations and admission procedures. Although on an ad hoc basis, we have managed to keep disruption of University services to a minimum.

Hampering research

In addition to direct damage from the earthquake, as a research university, the power shortage is taking a heavy toll on the University of Tokyo. We have implemented emergency electricity-saving steps such as suspending operation of a super computer to cut power consumption by half, and are keeping strict power-saving practices in place. But if this situation continues for an extended period of time, education and research, particularly in scientific fields, will suffer.

Even outside the affected regions, some universities have decided to cancel graduation and matriculation ceremonies or have deferred the start date of their spring semester courses due to intermittent aftershocks and disrupted transport services. Power shortages and the risk of blackouts are forcing universities to review the year-around academic schedule as well as research plans.

Negative impact on international exchange

The disaster has had a serious impact on our internationalization efforts, including student exchange programs. Foreign students have been under tremendous stress and are anxious about the current situation due to a lack of relevant information in foreign languages, and because many are not accustomed to earthquakes. A considerable number of international students have left Japan (30% of the total at the University of Tokyo) and many of those who were supposed to enter the University in April have expressed the intention to delay their admission.

On top of this, negotiations over inter-university agreements on student exchange could stall. The disaster is becoming a serious hurdle for the University in achieving its goal of building a global campus. Universities and the Japanese government must cooperate closely in dealing with these issues and trying to alleviate a heightened sense of international concern over Japan's safety.

So far, I have outlined challenges facing the University of Tokyo. It seems difficult to generalize the steps for universities to take, for I believe the degree and nature of challenges vary from one university to another. But what needs to be done is unmistakably clear.

Offering assistance to the disaster victims

First and foremost, we should offer assistance to stricken universities and affected students and local residents. The university community as a whole must mobilize personnel and relief supplies, and provide much-needed financial assistance. Creating a donation scheme is a viable option in this regard. The Japan Association of National Universities has received and has already started responding to offers of assistance. The University of Tokyo has also delivered emergency supplies on several occasions.

Medical doctors from university hospitals around the country are scrambling to help victims in affected areas. Motivated student volunteers will be expected to do their part when conditions permit. As educators, we have to set the stage for encouraging and supporting such student-led initiatives.

In the meanwhile, we will call on businesses to give utmost consideration to students' job-hunting, such as delaying recruitment activity, so as not to disadvantage affected students.

In the long term, this disaster will prove to be a major turning point for Japan's entire social and economic system. Undoubtedly, our conventional energy policy, people's livelihoods, and our values must undergo a fundamental change. It is essential for Japanese society to tackle head-on reconstructing the nation and building the human capital needed to take on that daunting task.

Each university should play its role and fulfill its share of responsibility for reconstruction based on its unique characteristics and strengths. A failure to do so means universities would lose their social *raison d'être*. Members of the university community must bear in mind that the key to rebuilding Japan from the debilitating blow of this disaster is none other than knowledge—the knowledge generated and acquired every day by university faculty, students and alumni members.

The University of Tokyo aims to become a “world-leading center of knowledge.” It is at times such as this that our true worth is put to the test. The University is entrusted with the tasks of nurturing a “civil elite,” who dedicate themselves to the public cause, and of finding solutions to social challenges, by employing the achievements of diverse

scholarly research. Greater efforts are expected of us to fulfill this mission. The power of nature inflicted an unimaginable level of destruction on northeastern Japan. Amidst this ongoing crisis, we should not falter in our resolve to pursue the truths about natural phenomena and the fabric of human society.

With waves of information inundating our society, it is the responsibility of the university to cope with the unfolding crisis, examine facts objectively, and disseminate accurate knowledge to society at large. Furthermore, in concert with the wisdom of the world, universities must proceed steadily forward on the long path toward realizing a better world to come. It is my hope that every single faculty member and student will ask themselves what role they can play as a member of the university, and will take appropriate action accordingly.