

Kumamoto Earthquakes, and 3,000 International Students at APU
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On April 14, 2016, a major earthquake struck Kumamoto Prefecture and the Island of Kyushu. Kumamoto suffered more than 40 casualties and widespread damage, including the complete destruction of the 200 meter long Aso Bridge in Minamiaso, Kumamoto. An even stronger earthquake struck in the early morning hours of April 16, shaking Oita Prefecture with the approximate force of a magnitude 6 earthquake.

Nikkei Business Online spoke with IMAMURA Masaharu, Vice President of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) about the current situation in Beppu City, Oita Prefecture. APU has approximately 6,000 students, about half of which are international students from 80 countries. An additional 549 domestic and 325 international students were admitted to APU at the start of April, with most of these international students living in University dorms. There are 1,114 students from about 50 countries in the dorms, with others students living in Beppu.

As a leading international Japanese university with students from both Japan and overseas, how does APU deal with an earthquake?

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Beppu City, Oita Prefecture was hit by a lower 6 intensity earthquake at 1:25 in the morning on April 16. Kumamoto Prefecture experienced a magnitude 7 earthquake on April 14, and after that we felt a number of aftershocks even in Oita. In a way it was like this helped prepare us for something, but even so a quake of magnitude 6 is intense. I live on the 8th floor of an apartment building in Beppu, and everything from books to dishes were scattered about.

Right after this earthquake hit, I and other APU staff started working as a team with the Director General, communicating by phone and email to assess the situation and make sure we were providing essential support.

We were concerned about our students, particularly about international students and students not familiar with Beppu. Most of the international students don't have experience with earthquakes, so our first focus immediately after the earthquake was to confirm the safety and security of our students.

We first looked at the student dorms. The APU campus is located on top of a hill on the outskirts of the city. About 1,200 out of 5,974 students (as of April 2016) live in APU House, our on-campus housing. Campus security and RAs (resident assistants; senior students who live in the dorm and act as leaders for new students) gathered all the students in the dorms and temporarily evacuated them to a parking lot on campus. Luckily it was not raining, and the students calmly moved to the evacuation site just as they had practiced during disaster drills.

At the same time, we were checking on the safety of students, staff, and faculty who live in Beppu. We have a web-based intranet system that University officials can use to post information and contact students.

Right after the earthquake we used this system to confirm the safety of our students, staff, and faculty. We received replies from 4,000 out of 5,974 students. Fortunately we only had a few students with minor injuries. At the same time, we confirmed the safety of 180 students who have family in Kumamoto where the earthquake occurred.

Since the morning of April 16, we have received a flood of phone calls and email from not only Japan but also all over the world as families have called to check on the safety of their students, the conditions at the University, the earthquake situation, as well as calls asking "Are there going to be classes next week?" or "I want my student to come home for a while."

It's not unreasonable for families overseas to be worried about their students, with the extensive damage in Kumamoto being broadcast on the news and memories of the Great East Japan Earthquake still fresh in so many minds. Additionally, we were getting calls from various embassies and consulates. In the middle of all of this, the Thai and Korean consulates arranged for buses to temporarily evacuate students to

Fukuoka or let them return home. A few days later, representatives from the Indonesian Embassy and the Korean Consulate came to the University to check the safety situation. We have also fielded inquiries from Sri Lanka, Brunei, Mongolia, and Taipei. We have also received calls expressing concern from partner universities and schools around the world.

On the afternoon of April 16, APU announced that we would cancel classes from the 18th through 20th.

Immediately after the earthquake, many of the students living in Beppu reached out to each other and went to earthquake shelters around the city. Especially when we had the most aftershocks from the 16th until the evening of the 17th, there were about 1,000 students in the various shelters; more than half of the people in some shelters were students from APU.

To be honest, we were worried about the students. To experience an earthquake like this in the middle of the night and then spend an anxious night in a shelter would be difficult for anyone, but half of our students are from overseas and most of them have never experienced an earthquake. On top of that, they are in a foreign country where they can't necessarily communicate in their native language.

I was certain we would find students in a panic as I went with other University staff to check on the students in the shelters over the weekend.

In the end, I had no need to fear.

In the shelters, Japanese students and international students alike said that this was the first major earthquake they had experienced, and they found the experience very frightening. However, at the same time they were asking what they could do to help, approaching the situation with a positive and proactive attitude, taking initiative to carry blankets and other supplies.

There were even students offering encouragement to an elderly resident who came to the shelter alone. The manager of the shelters said "The students from APU have been very polite, kind, and helpful."

Certain media reported that Beppu did not have support in English at the earthquake shelters, or that there were no earthquake preparations made despite having many foreign students living here. Instead, what we have in Beppu is a community that includes thousands of students, half of which are from overseas. To see citizens of Beppu and students from APU together in the shelters, helping each other without any major problems... I think it would not be an exaggeration to say that this may be unprecedented in the history of disaster prevention in Japan.

Of course one could point out that there were students who could not communicate because they could not speak Japanese, or that there were some students with poor manners, but I think that this was a very small number. I think that the experience that Beppu City and APU students gained could be a lesson as Japan grows toward a society of multicultural understanding.

As of today, April 19, there is no serious damage or casualties in Beppu. By Monday, April 18, life here had mostly returned to normal with schools open and classes resumed, and supermarkets, convenience stores, and even onsen (hot springs) open for business. Transportation to Beppu, including planes, trains, and automobiles, is moving without problem. Transportation within the city is also running normally. Basic utilities -- water, gas, and electricity -- are all functioning normally.

On the APU campus there are some places where brick walkways are now uneven or tiles have come off of walls, but we do not have any damage worse than this. The cafeteria and other University facilities are open for students to use. Library staff are working to sort and return books to the shelves.

While we are still concerned about aftershocks, life in Beppu City and on the APU campus is once again peaceful, and we are ready for students to return. Classes will resume on Monday, April 25. We decided to extend the class cancellation through April 21 and 22 partially because we know that many students sought shelter elsewhere in Japan or even overseas. Some of the company information sessions and other job hunting activities that were postponed because of the earthquake and class cancellations will be able to take place this weekend. The campus is available for extracurricular and

other activities.