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ESSAYS

Tsunamis in the Japan Major: Shifting Tides and Resilience

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Abstract

This reflective piece on the Japan Major at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) marks three decades of the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS), now the Bachelor of International Studies (BIS) since 2022. The past 15 years have been especially transformative for the Japan Major, shaped by two significant events: the devastating tsunami on 11 March 2011 and the declaration of a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Remarkably connected by a single date, these events frame a reflection on resilience, adaptability, and the evolving practices of global education, with student experiences at the forefront. Using the word 'tsunami' both literally and metaphorically, this essay explores how such shifts challenge and inspire pedagogical approaches.

Keywords

BAIS; UTS; International Studies; Japan' Tsunami; Covid-19

This reflective piece on the Japan Major at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) celebrates three decades of the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS), which became the Bachelor of International Studies (BIS) in 2022. The past decade and a half have been the most impactful and significant in the Japan Major. There was a devastating tsunami on 11 March 2011 that almost brought Japan to the brink of catastrophe, and then, less than ten years on 11 March 2020, a global pandemic that made the world stand still was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO). It is remarkable that these two events are connected

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by a single date, and although bleak, our reflection focuses on the positive aspects with student experiences at the centre. The word ‘tsunami’ is ‘a Japanese word from a double root: tsu, meaning port or harbour, and nami, meaning wave. The word looks innocuous in simple translation, but to those who live on the rim of the Pacific it can spell disaster’ ([‘Designing for Resistance to Disaster 1970’](#)). In this essay we use the word ‘tsunami’ to refer not only to the horrifying geographical phenomenon of 11 March 2011, but also as a metaphor for uncontrollable change. With tsunamis come shifting tides that require resilience, adaptability and flexibility, and it is these pedagogical challenges and the ways in which global education practices have evolved that we reflect on with the Japan Major.

Tsunami, Tides and Resilience of the Japan Major: 11 March 2011 (3/11)—Emi’s Vignette

‘じゃ、気を付けて日本に行ってくださいね。日本についたら必ず連絡してください。日本の1年間で充実したものになりますように’ (Please take care and have a safe trip to Japan. Make sure to contact me when you arrive. I hope your year in Japan will be a fulfilling one). With their air tickets tightly clutched in their hands, all 34 students responded with a ‘はい’ (*Hai* – Yes) in unison, their faces lighting up with excitement. Each smile reflected the thrill of anticipation as they stood on the brink of an adventure in Japan, filled with the promise of the unknown year-long ICS experiences that were about to unfold.



Just ten minutes after returning from the pre-departure meeting for the 2011 ICS Japan cohort, at around 16:10, I found myself glued to my computer screen. The room around me faded into the background as I absorbed the horrifying news of the devastating earthquake and the subsequent tsunami that had ravaged northern Japan.

It was March 11, 2011.

The magnitude 9.0 earthquake, known as the Tōhoku earthquake, or simply by the date as 3/11, struck at 14:46 JST (15:46 in Sydney), precisely when I was hearing students’ enthusiastic はいs (yeses).

I was serving in my first role as the acting ICS Japan coordinator while Dr. Keiko Morita was on sabbatical when the unimaginable happened. Emerging from a moment of confusion and disorientation, I was immediately struck by the urgent need for prompt and decisive action to deal with the profound repercussions of the event on our students. Thanks to the immediate action of an emergency response group led by Professor Peter Booth, who was the Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the time, we quickly and effectively addressed the extraordinary situation. This ensured that all members of the 2010 cohort safely returned (with the exception of one individual who was confirmed to be in a safe area). Additionally, an informed decision was made regarding the arrangements for the 2011 cohort:

In the event that the situation does deteriorate further (e.g. DFAT may change its travel advice to NO TRAVEL to Japan) we will contact you with further information about your options via your UTS email. If you do not wish to travel to Japan, we will make alternative arrangements for your study. (Extract from an email sent to students on 15 May 2011)

This message was dispatched to 33 students, except for one who was already on Okinawa Island, situated far to the south of the Tōhoku region where the earthquake hit. However, the subsequent meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear plants caused by the gigantic Tsunami, meant that the majority of the students were compelled to forgo or delay their anticipated year abroad.¹

¹ A few months later, and from the second semester, only a handful of students were able to resume their studies at universities in areas deemed safe outside the affected zones. For those who were not able to go to Japan at all, we developed

It was heartbreaking to witness the students' elated excitement turn into despair and disappointment. These students had invested three years diligently preparing for a year abroad—they studied Japanese Language and Culture, Contemporary Japan, and other prerequisite subjects. Many of them worked part-time to save money, envisioning the day of departure. Yet, on the very day they received their tickets, they were forced to relinquish their dreams. Just as tsunami tides had swallowed homes, their much-anticipated ICS experience was swept away.

What was at stake, however, was their ability to demonstrate maturity and resilience, navigating the situation without a trace of remorse or resentment. Remarkably, not a single student voiced a complaint. Instead, they exhibited an extraordinary level of adaptability, embracing the new reality with integrity and social responsibility. Even under immense pressure, they remained composed, completing their ICS studies in Sydney with unwavering dedication—a testament to their deep-seated commitment despite the challenges they faced.

In the following year, contrary to our initial concerns that the enrolment numbers for ICS Japan would drop, the number was much higher than we anticipated. The program not only retained its appeal but also continued to thrive as one of the most sought-after majors within the then BAIS program.

Despite Japan's vulnerability to earthquakes and other natural disasters, which might seem a disadvantage when choosing Japan for a year of exchange, the students who enrol in the Japan major are dedicated Japanophiles. They grow up with Pokémon, Studio Ghibli's anime, and Nintendo games—quite different from the generation of the late 1990s who studied Japanese in schools and universities driven by the strengthening economic ties between Australia and Japan. The growth of Japanese language learners was so significant that the term 'tsunami' was even used to describe the phenomenon in Australian Japanese language education. Japan remains Australia's second-largest trading partner as of 2020, but as sociocultural, geopolitical and economic dynamics 'shift tides,' so too have the motivations and backgrounds of our students, as well as the content of the program to stay aligned with these changes. What remains unchanged, however, is the resilience and aspirations of the students who are eager to study Japanese as part of what is now called the BIS program.

The Concert @UTS: Japan Aid 11-3-11

The devastating earthquake and subsequent tsunami that struck the northeastern coast of Japan left an eternal scar on the nation, with thousands confirmed dead, injured, or missing, and millions more grappling with the loss of basic necessities like electricity, water, food, and transportation. Overwhelmed by an intense sense of grief and helplessness, a dedicated team of Japanese academics and staff at UTS (Aki Okada Plume, Akiko Hiratsuka, Emi Otsuji, Keiko Yasukawa, Shoko Ono, and Yasushi Hirai—listed in alphabetical order) swiftly united to organise a charity concert—The Concert @UTS: Japan Aid 11-3-11. With unwavering dedication and little sleep, the team meticulously coordinated performers, secured a venue, and garnered financial and other support to bring the event to fruition.²



On 23 March at 6 pm, the Ariel Function Centre at UTS was packed. The Concert @UTS: Japan Aid 11-3-11 commenced with a one-minute 黙禱 (moment of silence) led by the then Pro-Vice Chancellor

a subject called 'In-Country Study in Sydney.'

² It is important to acknowledge that without the generous financial and administrative support from the Vice Chancellor, Pro-Vice Chancellor International, and the Dean of FASS at that time, executing such a large-scale event within twelve days would not have been possible. The Consulate General's office and the Japan Foundation, Sydney, also played a crucial role in disseminating the information through their local networks.

International of UTS, Professor Bill Purcell, who is also an economist who specialises in Japan. The venue was enveloped in a serene solemnity as the audience reflected on those who had lost their lives and homes. This was followed by a speech from the Deputy Consul General of Japan, Ms Aihara.

The concert began with tranquil yet powerful performances by the traditional koto musicians, Satsuki Odamura and the Sawai Koto Ensemble, whose melodic strains filled the space. The atmosphere then shifted as Aiko Goto, a distinguished violinist with the Australian Chamber Orchestra (ACO), took the stage. Her performance was a masterful blend of delicate harmonics and stirring intensity, with both precision and passion. The concert concluded with a powerful jazz performance by Waratah, led by Sandy Evans. The music echoed through the hall with a depth that seemed to reach into the very souls of those present. Every note was a testament to the emotional weight of the occasion, filling the venue with a palpable sense of commemoration.

The event drew over 350 attendees and raised over \$31,000, including a generous \$20,000 donation from UTS, all of which was donated to the Red Cross. In the following week, this grand-scale event and our initiative were widely covered in the local media, including an article in the largest local Japanese community newspaper, *Nichigo Press*. The deputy director of the Japan Foundation also reported it to their headquarters in Tokyo.

This is a testament to the Japanese team's determination to take meaningful action for those affected. It reflects a broader culture within the Japan major and is deeply ingrained in the commitment of the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies to social justice. The ethos of social responsibility that permeates the BAIS and, more broadly, UTS, is vividly reflected in the team's (as well as students') proactive stance, driven by resilience, determination, and dedication to confronting waves of challenges, as demonstrated during the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami incident.

Moreover, these small yet significant 'tsunamis' bring changes to everyday practices. It is in these moments that the BAIS's pedagogical efforts, honed over time, come to the forefront, becoming particularly evident during large-scale disasters, when the university's vision and commitment to social responsibility are most strongly manifested.

Tsunami, Tides and Resilience of the Japan Major: 2020– 2021 to Post-COVID life—Luke's Vignette

Not even a decade had passed before the Japan Major found itself coping with another 'tsunami' and yet again more shifting tides. At a strikingly similar time to the tsunami disaster nine years earlier, the world collectively found itself in chaos in March 2020. It is at this point in the essay that we shift from the geographical phenomenon to the metaphorical 'tsunami'—equally powerful and overwhelming in its force, the movement of the tide of events of the global pandemic from 2020 to 2021 required and tested resilience, character, and strength.

The first murmurings of a mysterious virus that most of the world heard about was between late 2019 and early 2020, when news of disruptions to daily life in Wuhan began to emerge. While these reports were noticed throughout the world, they did not immediately set off alarm bells. Things had changed by February 2020, however, when Italy became the epicentre of this new disaster, whose cause had by now been identified as a Novel Coronavirus outbreak and labelled 'COVID-19.' As we watched on from the sidelines as our colleagues in the Italian Major dealt with their students, who had already departed at the beginning of the year, other country majors in the degree also sprang into action. While news of the spread of this disease in Europe was slowly reaching Australia, I distinctly remember there being a degree of nonchalance in the general public. Perhaps it is because we often view ourselves as so far away from the rest of the world, as an impenetrable island that is somehow immune from the disasters of the world.

Japan, too, is mindful of its position as an island nation. While our partner universities had been in discussions with us about possible potential arrangements (such as pushing back arrival to the Fall Semester), no immediate cancellations came about. With a sense of cautious optimism, in the first week of March we held a predeparture meeting for students where their tickets were to be issued—although mindful of the surroundings, their sense of excitement was palpable and their enthusiasm beamed. They had been waiting three years for this and it was going to be their moment to shine and embark on a new adventure.

Then, in a scenario remarkably similar to the timeline of the 2011 tsunami, we received the first official cancellation from one of our partner universities the day after, declaring they would not be accepting students. As the situation in Japan worsened, one by one, the remaining partner universities confirmed either cancellations or postponements. This left us with the heartbreaking task of informing students that their stays would not proceed. Then, to the world's anticipation, the WHO declared a global pandemic.

It was March 11, 2020.

Lockdowns and closed national borders across the globe soon came into effect, and the realisation that a one-year stay would not be possible for students was upon us. We were propelled into action as educators—we faced the daunting task of transitioning to online learning, with many of us having limited previous training and experience. Issues related to technology access among students also emerged, creating disparities, and engaging students remotely proved difficult. These were the initial impacts of the metaphorical tsunami and the shifting tides were now truly in motion.

Additionally, the pandemic highlighted the importance of student and teacher well-being, prompting a greater focus on mental health support. However, this period also fostered innovation in teaching methods, with educators exploring new technologies and strategies that could enhance future learning experiences. The shift encouraged greater flexibility and adaptability, improved collaboration among teachers globally, and spurred professional development, ultimately enriching the educational landscape despite the challenges. Behind the scenes, transitions and restructuring to other iterations of the degree and diplomas were underway as substitutes. This encouraged new pedagogical models to adapt to the needs of both teachers and students where in situ education was not possible. This included developing new assessment activities, including the Virtual Landscape Tour that involved students utilising Google Maps to explore the cityscapes in which their partner universities were located.

Students produced fantastic work during this transition—today we are still in contact with students from this cohort, who have now taken up work and further study opportunities in Japan such as with the JET programme. This is a testament to the calibre and nature of students who are engaged with the Japan Major and speaks to the need for us as educators to be adaptable and flexible. Both events are also a testament to Japan's resilience as a nation and global powerhouse.

As the Japan Major moves forward and we look to more decades of the Bachelor of International Studies, there will be more tsunamis that will call on our resilience—whether physical ones caused by geographical phenomena or whether metaphorical ones caused by economic, political, or social crises. The experiences we have shared over the previous decades show that we will be ready to shift with the tides.

Reference

'Designing for Resistance to Disaster' 1970, *International Atomic Energy Agency Bulletin*, vol. 12, no. 4 (August): 23–27. Online, available: <https://www.iaea.org/publications/magazines/bulletin/12-4/designing-resistance-disaster>.