

## Academic Insight

# WHAT PLACE DOES ACADEMIA HAVE IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT?

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As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is perhaps, time to assess where academia stands in relation to civil protection and emergency management. The first decade saw huge changes in this area in the United Kingdom. It started with floods, and foot and mouth disease, continued with transportation and technological accidents together with acts of terrorism, ending with some appallingly cold weather. In addition, floods seemed to be an almost yearly occurrence. But, perhaps the greatest changes occurred in the organisation and procedures for dealing with emergencies. The responsibility for all emergencies, except terrorism, moved from the Home Office to the newly formed Civil Contingencies Secretariat in the Cabinet Office. New legislation, the Civil Contingencies Act, 2004, and associated regulations, together with accompanying manuals were introduced and greater responsibilities were placed upon a host of agencies and committees in respect of risk assessment, prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.

But the question this article poses is, where does academia stand following all these changes? And, does the emergency management profession appreciate the role that academia could play in assisting in the development of a greater understanding of the subject.

Practitioners learn from experience. But there are two kinds of experience – direct and indirect. Direct experience is obvious – it is

people, particularly at the front line, for the part they may have to play. And, it is in this whole area of indirect experience that academia has a huge role to play.

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actually being involved in the management of a real incident. The problem with direct experience is firstly, it can be very expensive in human terms – one has only to look at the learning experience undergone by emergency managers in New Orleans and the surrounding area after Hurricane Katrina struck to see just how expensive it can be. Secondly, although it appears that emergencies occur frequently, to the individual emergency manager they can be relatively rare events. So indirect experience, which includes training and education in the subject, exercising and learning from history, plays an important role in preparing

argue that the same has occurred in the United Kingdom. There is little connection or, indeed, discussion between the universities offering emergency management related courses, particularly as to where emergency management has come from and suggestions as to how it should develop, and neither has there been any indication from government as to the direction that it would like emergency management education to follow.

In order to see what academia needs to do, it is, perhaps, worth looking at military history. To a greater or lesser extent, wars have occurred in the world since people

first inhabited it. Throughout history, people have also been subjected to emergencies brought about by both natural and human-made events. In a recent article, Andrew Lambert described some of the difficulties that military history, which he describes as "a very old specialisation", underwent during the 20th Century. He pointed out that "the impact of war and preparation for war on society over time was of no interest to contemporary armed forces, more concerned to prepare for the next conflict than to understand their connection with the society they served." (Lambert (undated):1) There are parallels to be drawn here with emergency management. The impact of emergencies on society is of little interest to emergency managers who are similarly and, perhaps, quite naturally, more concerned with being ready for the next emergency. Consequently, the impact that emergencies have on the society they serve in the United Kingdom is grossly under-researched.

Despite the fact that degree courses in emergency management and related subjects have now been offered by United Kingdom universities for nearly 20 years, emergency management – in some academic institutions it is referred to as disaster management or by some other similar title – does not appear to be a recognised academic discipline in the same way, for instance, as military history. For a start, it does not appear to have a recognised home in that where it is based in a University depends, it seems, on who first thought to introduce the programme. In other words, it is very much an adjunct to another academic discipline. For instance, at Coventry University, the Centre for Disaster Management is within the Department of Geography, Environment and Disaster Management which is one of four



departments within the Faculty of Business, Environment and Society; at Glamorgan University it appears to come under the Faculty of Sports, Health and Science: at Hertfordshire University it is within the School of Health and Emergency Professions; at Leicester University, it comes under the Civil Safety and Security Unit which is part of the Institute of Life Long learning; at Northumbria University, the Disaster and Development Centre is in the School of Applied Sciences; and at Kingston University

the subject is taught within the School of Earth Sciences and Geography.

Emergency practitioners who take advantage of attending one of these relatively new courses see it as an opportunity, in some cases a necessity to obtain a qualification in the subject rather than seeing universities as institutions that can help emergency managers, in general, to further their educational development. There is, of course, nothing wrong in this, but few, if any,

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undertake these courses with the intention of moving into academia, in general, let alone the academic discipline of emergency management in particular.

So, it appears that few academic institutions have really thought through why they have committed themselves to becoming involved in emergency management. In most cases, if the truth be known, it came about as a result of the vision of one or two people in a particular department, who saw an opportunity to exploit an emerging market, rather than as a conscious decision by the university, who saw it as an emerging academic discipline to be nurtured and developed.

Academic research has long been associated with all kinds of activities but the relevance of it, in relation to civil protection and emergency management, has not been fully recognised in the United Kingdom. In most cases, emergency management is seen as a negative activity, i.e. it is preparing for something that everyone hopes, and, in some cases, believes, will never happen, little money is put into research in the same way as it is towards activities that make companies and organisations more profitable in today's complex environments. Even management schools do not devote as much time as they should to the management of emergencies, which is why, perhaps, government and so many businesses appear to be faced with so many crises today.

Until now, academics associated with the emergency management field, e.g. Alexander, Flin and Toft amongst a number, have tended to write very general books on the subject. Few have actually written about the events

that surrounded specific emergencies. And it is in this area that one sees a huge difference between emergency management and, for example, military history. Any visitor to a military library cannot fail to notice the number of books on the shelves about different wars, battles and insurgencies, some written by the military commanders themselves but many written by military historians. But public emergency managers,



including those from the Civil Contingencies Secretariat and other sections of government, the emergency services, local government, particularly those working in emergency planning departments, serve society in precisely the same way as Lambert suggests

the military do; so, too, it could be argued do those employed in private companies, because most organisations serve society in one way or another, otherwise they would not remain in business. But, for whatever reason, such people do not write about their experiences. Official reports, of which there are plenty, tend to be very bland. They do not explain feelings or why a particular emergency service commander took a certain action as opposed to another option he/she may have had. This is an area that academia could develop in the same way that military historians have built themselves a credible reputation.

If they are to be treated seriously by the emergency world, universities have a responsibility to integrate academic learning with the practicalities of managing emergencies. Many are undertaking this responsibility to a greater or lesser extent although questions have been raised by practitioners as to the up-to-date content of particularly the case studies used in some of the courses now on offer (ICPEM, 2009:11). But the responsibilities go beyond that. Academia has a responsibility to record and communicate what has happened in the past. In posing the question as to whether there should be an academic discipline related to the history of disasters, Alexander pointed out that "far too often, although lessons were identified (registered), they were then stored away (archived) to be forgotten and ignored" (ICPEM, 2009:11). Academia has a responsibility if not to develop doctrine, at least to encourage its development, basing it on relevant, fundamental principles, which focus on the victims rather than on the organisations that have a role to play in the management of the disaster.

The challenge then, for the future, for academics working in the emergency management discipline, is to sustain academic standards that are essential to the credibility of the subject but, at the same time, to make a far greater contribution to the mainstream debates. Universities need to foster scholarly and educational alliances

they do on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, emergency management, as taught in universities, needs to retain its connections with the reality of what happens on the ground. But there is clearly much to be gained from making emergency management a recognised academic discipline in a way that is similar to military history. At a recent

Secondly, academics working in this discipline need to start writing books on some of the major events or patterns of events that have occurred in their field so that there is an historical analysis of what took place but, more importantly, perhaps, to give the practitioners of the future access to a repository of knowledge from which they can learn. Thirdly, relevant research needs to be carried out in all areas associated with emergencies, but particularly in relation to both the short-term and long-term impacts these emergencies have on economic growth, and on individual businesses and communities. ▲

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between themselves, the government, the professional associations that represent the emergency community and the individuals within that community.

Lambert suggests that "the future for military history lies in combining the academic rigour of the university with the multi-disciplinary opportunities" offered by what he now terms as was studies (Lambert (undated):3). Perhaps the future for emergency management lies in combining the academic rigour that universities are in a position to offer, from a wider perspective, with the more restricted aspects that some establishments currently offer in the various Centres which have been set up, but which focus specifically on the management of emergencies.

Universities should not lose sight of the fact that, at the moment, most people attending their courses in emergency management are either looking for a qualification, which is a requirement of the employment they seek, or because they want to be better at what

conference, Wayne Harrop explained how good theory allows the exploration of 'philosophical divergent' viewpoints and enables people to have deeper levels of comprehension, thus allowing them to make informed decisions when facing the many problems that occur today. They are better able to make a critical analysis of what is taking or has taken place. Making emergency management – perhaps emergency history might be a more apt title – a properly recognised academic discipline would make emergency managers "flexible, thoughtful professionals", better equipped to meet the increasing number of problems society appears to face in these areas today (ICPEM, 2009:14).

So, what should be done? First of all, universities need to find a recognised faculty/department, whether it is management, history or society, under which to place emergency management so it is seen as an academic discipline in its own right, rather than as an adjunct to another discipline.

#### References:

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