One of the most serious problems affecting the modern world is the increasing vulnerability of populations and communities to the impacts of natural/technological disasters and complex emergencies. Whilst the challenges inherent in the logistic preparation and response to such events had received sporadic coverage in the academic literature, it was the impact of the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and hurricane Katrina in 2005 that gained the attention of operations and logistics researchers with Van Wassenhove (2006) being particularly instrumental in focussing attention on humanitarian logistics as a new research field. In parallel, the Fritz Institute has been actively supporting and conducting research on humanitarian logistic issues and they identified “lack of recognition of the importance of logistics” along with “inadequate use of technology” and “limited collaboration” as major gaps in humanitarian operations (Thomas and Kopczak, 2005; Thomas, 2003; Thomas, 2004). The overall result has been a growing recognition of the importance of the need to develop and improve the management of the supply networks (and the associated logistics function) in the humanitarian sector.

The Fritz Institute reports also identified two further gaps, namely lack of professionalisation and the need for improved institutional learning as critical points of improvement (Thomas and Kopczak, 2005). Consequently, in parallel with consideration of technological and process related aspects of the humanitarian logistics challenge, there is also an increasing appreciation within the sector of the importance of professionalisation of the logistic support function and the role played by training and education in its broadest sense. This should be understood to include consideration of the whole spectrum from doctoral research, via executive education, to practitioner training at a national or international level. For example, Kovács and Spens (2011) provide a list of training, certification and education programs in the humanitarian sector and new programs are being established every year.

The early results of this focus on education and training began with the identification of the necessary skill set for those working in this field. Unsurprisingly, pure logistics skills such as warehousing, transportation management, inventory control, and purchasing have been found on top of the list (Kovács and Tatham, 2010; Kovács et al., 2012). However, Walker and Russ (2010) highlighted that a number of additional skills such as needs assessment, safety and security, monitoring and evaluation are also important to this sector. As a result, although, the broad skill set a humanitarian logistician should possess to effectively deliver his/her job has been identified, questions regarding the delivery, testing and retention of these topics in a high stress-high turnover environment remain unanswered.

In part, this reflects the broader issue of inter-agency coordination and cooperation that has been a long-standing challenge within the humanitarian logistic sector (Tatham and Pettit, 2010), one manifestation of which is the absence of clearly agreed, understood and accepted standards and practices that would, in turn, form the basis for both training syllabi and improvement focussed research. In this regard, it is instructive to reflect on the extent to which the international search and rescue community has achieved commonality of policies, processes and procedures across multiple
organisations (both governmental and non-governmental), countries and cultures (INSARAG, 2010). An appropriate replication of this approach, as is currently being developed by the international medical communities (IASC, 2012), may, potentially, prove a fruitful direction of travel.

With this introduction in mind, the aim of this Special Issue has been to promote new theoretical, empirical and practitioner research on the developments within the areas of education and training in support of the logistic preparation and response to natural disasters and complex emergencies. Specific aspects such as the use of innovative teaching methods, together with consideration of pedagogical issues and research in the areas of broader disaster management and/or development studies are all within the scope of the special issue. We believe that the collection of four papers presented in this special issue provide a tangible step forward in our understanding of training and education issues in this field. Individually, these papers shed light on the current situation in respect of the education/training gap, job profiles, learning mechanisms of humanitarian organisations, and on the use of service learning as a delivery mechanism for humanitarian logistics education.

Bölsche, Klump and Abidi open the special issue with “Specific competencies in humanitarian logistics education”, in which they explore the question of whether a training gap still exists in the humanitarian logistics field and if it does, how can it be closed. After an extensive review of existing programs and practices they present the results of their field survey. They argue that the education gap is still clearly recognisable in the field and point out that one key reason for this is that “logistics competencies and skills do not develop as fast as the practice environments do.” Bölsche et al. also observe that continuing education programmes carry great value to field logisticians but that the training curriculum should be tailored to the conditions and requirements of the theatre of operations.

The second paper, “Exploring the link between the humanitarian logistician and training needs” by Allen, Kovács, Masini, Vaillancourt and Van Wassenhove evaluates job profiles in humanitarian logistics and assesses task priorities in order to understand training needs. Their survey, undertaken in collaboration with the Humanitarian Logistics Association and its membership, indicates that career progression affects the importance ranking of activities of humanitarian logisticians. Consequently, Allen et al. recommend a differentiation in both content and nature between the training programmes offered to logisticians in the field versus those working on country levels or in a headquarters. They also note that a study of career paths for humanitarian logisticians is a clear area for future research.

In their contribution Lu, Goh and De Souza emphasise the importance of the context in which humanitarian organisations operate, and in “Learning mechanisms for humanitarian logistics” they explore the resultant learning mechanisms. Applying organisational learning theory to the field of humanitarian logistics they identify four learning mechanisms, namely hiring, doing, observing and searching. They then develop a theoretical framework to examine learning processes along humanitarian relief supply chain activities and validate their findings using the case of a non-government organization (NGO) in Indonesia.
The final paper in this special issue titled “Integrating service-learning and humanitarian logistics education” by Goffnett, Helferich and Buschlen draws our attention to university level courses on humanitarian logistics and how service-learning could enhance the delivery and retention of the necessary knowledge for future logisticians and facilitate a transformational learning experience. This paper is an excellent primer for educators interested in offering entry level courses on humanitarian logistics and supply chain management and in doing so it has clear potential to transform operations management and logistics students into future humanitarian logisticians.

Self-evidently, four papers in a special issue will not, of themselves, be sufficient to solve the education and training challenges in humanitarian logistics sector. Clearly, considerably more work is needed, nevertheless we believe that these four papers represent an excellent starting point and each offers a number of avenues for further research – a fact that emphasises both the potential within the field as well as the importance of such research to deliver improved outcomes for those affected by such disasters/emergencies.

References


