

President's Address at the Saitama University Graduation Ceremony for the academic year 2020

Congratulations to everyone celebrating their graduation and completion here today. Today we are celebrating the completion of 1516 Bachelor's degrees, 552 Master's degrees, and 33 Doctoral degrees, of which 26 Bachelor's degrees, 98 Master's degrees, and 11 Doctoral degrees were completed by international students from Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Russia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Turkey, UK and Viet Nam.

On behalf of all our staff, I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to the family and friends who supported you throughout your journey.

More than a year has passed since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Japan. Many people remain in hospital and healthcare professionals continue to work tirelessly to provide treatment. Here at the university, we were forced to implement stringent measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Entry to the campus has been restricted, and most classes were conducted online. For many months, the campus has remained silent, and here we are on the day of graduation, with only a handful of representatives able to participate. During your time here, you have connected with teachers and friends, made lasting friendships, deepened your knowledge, and even during the pandemic have continued to use your time with intent and purpose. This day of departure marks an important milestone in your life, and not being able to share that with you in person is a matter of great personal regret. Yet, this is something we must bear to slow the spread of the virus.

Now, as you stand on the threshold of your bright future, I would like to gift you some words of wisdom to carry with you as you go: "keep learning" and "keep thinking."

The spread of COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact on social systems, and we have seen many new endeavours as society tries to adapt. Many measures that were implemented to prevent the spread of the virus will undoubtedly remain in place even after the virus no longer poses a threat. We are welcoming in a new era of globalization, and the normalization of work-from-home and online learning experiences has significantly advanced the digital transformation of society. These changes make us question once again what it is that defines a sustainable society, and how we can achieve that. It is imperative that we face these questions head on, and that each of us seeks out a viable solution.

Right now, we are entering a new era, ushered in by the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The progress of digital technology is at the foundation of this new era, and plans and proposals are to be based on mass data collected from AI and IoT (Internet of Things) - technology that connects man and machine. It is an era where networks and big data are about to bring significant changes to the way we live our lives. However, while the digital revolution makes our lives easier in many ways, we are also forced to contend with the fact that how we work, and how we live, will also be profoundly affected. The rise and fall of industries is something every generation experiences, and the skills and knowledge in demand change accordingly. Now, the rate at which that happens will only keep getting faster. Furthermore, as lifetime employment is replaced by short-term and independent contracts, the hiring process will also change. How can we, who are living through this social revolution, adapt and live through these changes?

The first skill we need to cultivate is the motivation to “keep learning.” Three-time Pulitzer prize winner, Thomas Friedman, wrote of the importance of life-long learning in his book, “Thank You For Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations” (Farrar, Starys and Girous, 2016). Friedman talks of how in a world where technological advancements, globalization, climate change are accelerating, you need to keep learning, and relearning, if you want to keep working your whole life. In other words, you must have a sense of ownership over your life-long education. Friedman goes on to say that “the big divide will be “the motivational divide” - who has the self-motivation, grit and persistence to take advantage of all the free or cheap online tools to create, collaborate and learn.” With a clear goal, and the motivation to keep learning, you have the tools to carve a path toward your future.

The second skill, one that will help you achieve that goal and remain independent in society, is the ability to “keep thinking.” With increased speed, comes increased unpredictability, and the time we are living in is no different. To remain independent, you need the ability to make decisions for yourself, and the strength to follow through. Every new thing you see, every new thing you learn, approach it with an open and curious mind, peer into the very heart of the matter, and cultivate your ability to question and think.

Furthermore, the problems that you will face, be they in your career or society’s, cannot be solved on the power of one academic discipline alone. As AI research advances, and the technology is applied to more diverse areas of society, we will need to consider the legal and ethical issues, and the subject will require an interdisciplinary approach that draws on humanities and social sciences. Those of you who are going on to further study should cultivate curiosity and appreciation for all subjects, while also deepening knowledge of your own. Those of you who are stepping out into the world, use the knowledge that you have acquired, and the experiences you have gained here. Live your life with purpose and an open mind so that you may never lose your motivation to keep thinking and keep learning.

Finally, I would like you to remember that your time here has helped shape you as a human being, and will always be your second home. And at times, I hope you may recall fondly the days of youth, spent with faculty and friends on the beautiful green campus of Saitama University. Whatever challenges you face, if you arm yourself with the knowledge gained from your studies here and reflect on the experiences that taught you how to overcome trouble and conflict, and how to survive, I am confident you will have the strength and courage to take one more step forward. If you have the chance, please come back and visit Saitama University. Your second home will always be here to welcome you, and will always be your biggest supporter.

It is my earnest hope that you graduates of Saitama University live boldly and brightly as you stride down life’s road.

Once again, congratulations on your graduation and completion.

March 25, 2021
Takafumi Sakai
President, Saitama University