

2021 Saitama University Degree Awarding Ceremony - President's Address

Congratulations to everyone celebrating their graduation and completion here at Saitama University's commencement ceremony today. On behalf of all our staff, I would like to express my sincere affection and gratitude to the family and friends who supported you throughout your journey here.

Today we acknowledge the graduation and completion of 32 undergraduate students, 23 Master's students, and 22 PhD students. These totals include 34 international students from China, Bangladesh, Viet Nam, Nepal, Afghanistan, India, Egypt, Guinea-Bissau, and Myanmar.

Since last year, the spread of COVID-19 has been the reason for unprecedented threats and many new constraints. I sincerely respect everyone joining us here today who overcame these challenges and continued pushing forward in your studies and research.

So, today, in celebration of your departure from Saitama University, I would like to talk about technological innovation and lifestyles in the era of 100-year lifespans. Looking back on my own life of more than 65 years, it is obvious that technological innovation has brought massive change throughout the decades. Computers are one example. PCs were being sold right around when I myself graduated. They had 32K bytes of RAM, and external storage was actually cassette tapes, with the digital data converted into audible sound. Later, CPUs and memory got faster, and storage got bigger, and now we have smartphones with 128G of memory, with chips containing 4.3 billion transistors, which can perform 600 billion calculations per second. I remember the feeling of awe when I connected to the whole world in an instant through the internet using this little flat thing in the palm of my hand. These advances in technology, the arrival of paperless work, the evolution of communication methods, and the implementation of digital transformation, have changed our society day by day.

Recent successful advances in quantum computing have shown us that we can still expect technological innovation to speed up. Technology will progress based on the core elements of the 4th industrial revolution including IoT (internet of things), AI (artificial intelligence), big data, and robots. Forty years from now, I guarantee that you will feel just as amazed as me.

Meanwhile, progress means more than technological innovations - it always comes together with new challenges. We can anticipate advances in technology to make our lives better and more comfortable, but this will also cause new problems. Globalization has brought us endless benefits, but the negative side has become obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic. If we consider threats like climate change due to global warming, and the appearance of new infectious diseases, we can say that we are truly standing at the gates of an unknown society unlike anything that humans have experienced before.

Another example of this unknown society is the extension of the human lifespan. They say that more than half of children born in Japan in 2007 will live past 100 years old, and the truth is, that Japan is already aging ahead of the rest of the world, and as of last year, there were over 80,000 residents over 100 years old. Lifespans are already extending, and the era of 100-year lifespans has arrived. Aging is happening worldwide, and experts are already discussing how we should address this as a society, and how we should live our lives as individuals.

In 2016, the book “The 100-Year Life: Living and Working in an Age of Longevity” by Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott had a resounding impact across the world. “The 100-Year Life” has a lot say. Most of us have thought of life in 3 stages of education, work, and retirement, but the era of 100-year lifespans will shift to multiple stages, adding an “Explorer” stage of self-discovery through exploring our world, a “Independent producer” stage when we work independently without an employing organization, and a “Portfolio worker” stage when we’re active in different fields at the same time. In order to maximize the benefits of this multi-

stage lifespan, we must acquire knowledge with flexibility, we must seek new thinking styles, and we must view the world with a fresh perspective to build a network of people. It also recommends to change our own beliefs when necessary, and to always look forward to the future. Furthermore, we are told that in order to live an independent life in a changing world, the fundamental questions “Who am I?” and “What am I really made of?” are more important than ever, and that it is essential to consider our personal identity and worth.

Here in Japan, we are already adjusting to this multi-stage lifespan. Changes in employment systems include more companies allowing side businesses, the spread of contract-type employment, and the rise of gig workers. Labor market liquidity has increased, and it has become commonplace to change jobs mid-career, start a new company, and work as a freelancer. We are finally seeing diversification and complexity in working styles. Plenty of people are shifting to self-employment and portfolio work following mandatory retirement using the extra years granted by longevity. In order to make these shifts possible, we must be accepting of changes in society and technology, and we must maintain an attitude that is willing to learn. Multi-stage lifespans will demand recurrent education with a “work-study-work” cycle plus “re-skilling” periods where we acquire new skills, abilities, and knowledge while continuing to work. Recent years have seen the rise of free or affordable online lessons offered by universities in Japan and around the world. If you’re ambitious, you can continue your education no matter where you are. Consistently dedicating a portion of your time to education in a multi-stage lifespan will lead to a better life for you.

Each and every one of you, standing at the gates of this unknown society with more advanced technological innovation and a 100-year lifespan, needs to be engaged in solving society’s issues and act as change makers to forge the way into the future. In order to achieve this, you will need to continue learning across a fusion of fields including humanities, sociology, and natural sciences, and you will

need to collaborate beyond contradictions and national borders. It is extremely important to maintain a habit of genuine communication with people from diverse backgrounds that are outside your own academic field and personal interests. Never forget that a diverse network will be the driving force of new creativity.

All of you will find that the journey of life has both brilliant waves of happiness, and days of hopeless dark despair. When you stand at life's crossroads, take confidence in the skills that you gained here on Saitama University's beautiful green campus, and have the strength to keep walking forward.

Here's a quote from our school song:

Reaching for our distant dreams, we will,

Draw from the flow of new wisdom

May the youth always have hope

It is my sincere desire that you all move forward with a heart full of hope, and a blazing bright spirit.

Once again, congratulations on your graduation and course completion.

September 22, 2021

Takafumi Sakai

President, Saitama University