

President's Address on the occasion of Saitama University Entrance Ceremony 2021

April has come round once more. As the campus looks forward to the blooming of spring, so we too look forward to having you all join us here. Today, we are proud to welcome 1,598 Bachelor's students, 543 Master's students and 51 Doctoral students to our university.

Allow me to officially congratulate you on beginning your studies here and on behalf of all our staff, let me welcome you with an open heart. I would also like to express my congratulations and gratitude to the family and friends who supported you throughout your journey.

Last year, the spread of COVID-19, along with the declaration of a state of emergency has had a significant impact on both our individual lives and society as a whole. Students starting their freshman year at the university not only had to contend with the difficulties of the pandemic, but also with the introduction of the Common Test for University Admissions and the confusing reformation of the university exams. Students who are joining us as graduates spent last year under severe restrictions, most likely in a state of anxiety and frustration unable to proceed with their research as they would have liked. You have all continued tirelessly with your studies and research under incredibly difficult circumstances, to join us here as undergraduates and graduates, and you have my deepest, sincerest admiration.

Saitama University traces its roots back 147 years to the founding of Saitama Normal School. In 1949, Saitama Normal School was joined with Saitama Youth Normal School and Urawa High School to become a new university, and in its 71-year history has sent over 80000 graduates out into the world. Our graduates, including the winner of the Nobel Prize for physics, Takaaki Kajita, are active in a wide range of fields, from politics, economics and industry to academia and education, and make significant contributions to the development of Japan and the world.

Now, today I would like to talk about "learning." But first, let me talk a little about the history of the Urawa High School. From the Meiji era until after the end of the Pacific War, the high schools that were part of the old education system were places to provide preparatory education to enter the faculties of the old system of universities. The universities followed a liberal arts curriculum with a focus on humanities and foreign languages. The Urawa High School opened in 1921, exactly 100 years ago, and was originally located on the site of Kita-Urawa Park, in what was then Urawa Machi, Kita-Adachi-Gun, Saitama prefecture.

In 2009, the university celebrated its 60th anniversary, and was presented with important historical documents by the alumni association of the Urawa High School. These documents were then placed in a memorial room in the library. One of these documents contained an essay titled “On Learning” by the philosophy professor Yutaka Awaya, who writes “Only when we have digested knowledge, made it flesh and blood, may we say it has been ‘learned’. Only a person with broad knowledge, an avid curiosity and capable of absorb information, may be called ‘a person of learning’. Hence, to advance in any specialty or profession, an education that fosters learning in a broad range of subjects is essential.”

A student taught by Professor Awaya wrote “‘Learning’ is the power to expand time and space.” The essay continues, “The desire to ‘learn’ is at the core of self-motivated study, both in the classroom and out. Learning is what helps us to cultivate compassion, empathy and an open mind.” The student also wrote that the “power of learning” lies in its ability to help us see the world with a broader perspective, and seek to make connections with others. These documents show us that a deep love for ‘learning’ in its purest sense was at the heart of the Urawa High School educational philosophy. These essays also place learning as the very quality that enables us to obtain and imbibe knowledge, and approach matters with an open mind.

Modern society has undergone a major transformation, driven by dramatic advances in digital technology and globalization. The pace of technological innovation will continue to accelerate, and the COVID-19 pandemic will likely cause people to re-examine and reflect on what is important to them. Furthermore, as the United Nations establishes Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring the sustainability of the earth, humanity, and society is becoming even more critical. These are only reflections of a major change, and 20 to 30 years from now, when you are at the center of society, the world will be undergoing even greater changes than we can imagine. “Learning,” which Professor Awaya and his colleagues place so much importance on, will provide you with a strong foundation so you may respond creatively to these changes. By enriching yourself with learning, you develop the ability to think autonomously, and can carve your own path in an ever-changing age. If you wish to truly “learn,” you must look further than your studies. You must seek out people, books, experiences, and never lose your curiosity. At university, students are expected to identify problems on their own, and use their creativity to find solutions and seek out the truth. These problem-solving skills are also integral to learning. To foster learning, you must do more than just acquiring knowledge. You must take that knowledge, absorb it, and make it your own. Only then can you say you have truly “learned.” I hope you remember this during your time here.

At our university, all the different faculties and graduate schools are brought together in our beautiful green campus. It is a place where students from different faculties and specialties can come together. This makes it the ideal environment to meet people from different backgrounds, to broaden your knowledge and develop your mind. In addition, the university has strong ties with over 170 overseas universities and prides itself on providing rich experiences to overseas students, and to Japanese students studying abroad. In the 2019 academic year, we welcomed 634 international students, and 57 students were undergoing long-term study at partner universities overseas. Saitama University has also established an international dormitory where international students and Japanese students can live together, where we hope students may cultivate a comprehensive understanding of diversity in culture. As I mentioned earlier, if you wish to foster learning, you must make efforts to educate yourself. Eventually, the restrictions put in place for the pandemic will be lifted, and alongside new online technology, people will once again start moving and international exchange will return. We offer many programs for students to study abroad, and I hope that you will take on these challenges. Find the confidence and the desire to knock on the door and take the opportunity that awaits you. Remember, your potential for growth is limited only by your own imagination.

Today, you have taken the first step on your academic journey. As last year so clearly taught us, there are many things that we cannot predict. However, whatever the era, whatever the society, learning is a path that always leads to hope. I am sure that while you are at Saitama University, you will learn well, discover friendships, and experience both highs and lows. All of this will lead you to a bright and hopeful future. We, the faculty and staff, will do our best to support you on your journey.

Once again, congratulations on your admission to our school.

April 8, 2021
Takafumi Sakai
President, Saitama University