

President's Address at the 2017 Saitama University Graduation Ceremony

On the campus of Saitama University, the color of spring has become darker with each rain, and cherry blossoms began to bloom earlier than usual. On this pleasant day, I extend my sincere congratulations on your graduation as the President of Saitama University. In addition, I express deep respect and warm congratulations to your families who have given support to you.

The numbers of graduates who earned doctoral, master's and professional degrees today are 24, 494 and 22, respectively. 82 of them are from 18 overseas countries, and 48 are re-educated people in the working world. It is a distinctive commencement that is full of diversity only in "Saitama University All in One Campus at Metropolitan Area Saitama".

In the entrance ceremony for some of you three years ago, I pointed out that research is an act of repeating challenges and failures with passion aiming at "higher things", and that there are the immense values in making your way of thinking more diverse through discussions with others. I explained also that serendipity, meaning occasional events and experiences, requires vigorous curiosity, strong desire, observation and insight. In the entrance ceremony for most of you two years ago, in addition, I introduced the message from Dr. Takaaki Kajita, the 2015 Nobel Prize winner: "Nobody knows when he has an important encounter that really decides his life. You should open your eyes and heart widely to prepare for the time when you came across important person and/or thing". Each of you must have got various encounters and experiences in the study process at Saitama University. Moreover, you must have achieved the research repeating challenge and failure with passion, while the outcome and serendipity in the study are different in level. With this fulfillment as a milestone, let me talk about how you should go next.

Seven years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake, but the way to recovery is still tough. Under such circumstances, it was reported in the news a few weeks ago that the cause of the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident is still examined. While there should be many problems in its having become the unprecedented catastrophe, I would like to take up two problems in conjunction with each of you as a professional who has got a degree. One is "liberal arts of professionals" and the other is "choosing of information".

As for the first problem "liberal arts of professionals", Prof. K. Washida, a philosopher and the President of Kyoto City University of Arts, and Prof. J. Yamagiwa, a famous gorilla researcher and the President of Kyoto University, talked about how scientists should be as professionals in their book ("Thought on City And Nature", Shueisha, 2017). As an example of clinical philosophy, Prof. Washida first explains a sense of housework such as thinking about what to cook with remaining ingredients, washing dishes and looking after children while preparing meals. He then tells, "It is important to have a wisdom of worrying about the whole and the others by watching around and by using available things well. Such intellect is now demanded. As academic disciplines have been segmentalized, the person who controls all the intellect has gone and this might have caused the nuclear accident to be enlarged." He continues as follows. "People, who can gather materials to think, make their own hypotheses and verify them, are necessary for science. The doctor holder is originally a person who has received such training and can be a future professional by applying his skills to non-professional themes."

Meanwhile, Prof. Yamagiwa points out as an anthropologist, "Recently it is not necessary to gather even for a meal because people prefer to eat their favorite things anytime and anywhere they like, just as scientists stay in their favorite academic areas without turning their eyes on the outside world. Scientists dig deeply into their own themes to master their specialty and, during that time, there is no room to pay attention to other things." Then Prof. Washida follows, "Now scientist is not a wise man with intellect, but a person just with knowledge. He needs the intellect paying attention not only vertically but also horizontally. If the nuclear power plant accident is rediscussed on the basis of previous housework idea, for example, it is necessary to foresee the budget, a future risk and cleanup. Isn't it the liberal arts of professionals to be able to pay attention to all these directions horizontally?" I am sure that this is a very important viewpoint to all of you.

Now the second problem "choosing of information" is considered. Let me introduce first an essay entitled "Discarding Information" (Gakuto, Maruzen, 2017) by Prof. H. Kainuma, Ritsumeikan University. He pointed out that, in Fukushima after the Great East Japan Earthquake on 3.11, 2011, the problem started from the information deficiency, such as distrust of information hidden in the nuclear energy industry and administration, but that a new problem of information overload was started enlarging behind it. He continues, "Information are pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and knowledge is a picture completed by combining them. People cannot find a meaning even if thrown in large amounts of pieces of information. Even with small pieces, on the contrary, experts pick pieces, imagine the whole picture from them to find some structure, and make it intellect. In the era of information overload, the task of discarding information to regain holistic nature is required for those who are considered as professionals."

Also, Prof. Sheena Iyengar, Columbia University, who is the author of "Arts of Choosing", has an interesting dialogue with an international journalist Mr. K. Ohno (K. Ohno ed., "Frontiers of Knowledge", PHP New Book, 2013). In modern society where information overflows, we have to take steps to distinguish information necessary for us. Mr. Ohno gives a question whether the meaning of modern choosing has changed compared to the age of no Internet, and Prof. Iyengar answers as follows. "The meaning of choosing has not changed, but the necessity to know how to choose has increased more than before. In the past, there were limited information available, but now the information is infinite. By checking the compatibility with older information, you can choose the information and eliminate waste of keeping information gathered endlessly." It is very suggestive for human professionals who are in the era of IoT and coexist with AI.

In the present knowledge society where future prediction is difficult and social innovation is necessary, we must gather intellect of diverse experts. I do want all of you to master liberal arts of professionals, including appropriate choosing and discarding of information. And, I sincerely expect each of you to significantly contribute to the knowledge society as a well-balanced intellectual professional and as a graduate of Saitama University.

March 23, 2018

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