

President's Address at the 2022 Saitama University Welcome Ceremony for Students Enrolled in 2019 and 2020

Today's welcome ceremony is being held to welcome our new second-year and third-year students, who were unable to have entrance ceremonies for the past two years due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

To the new second-year and third-year students, I am saying this to you one or two years late, but once again, congratulations on your admission to Saitama University. Over these past two years, we have welcomed 3187 undergraduate students, 1159 Master's students, and 154 Doctoral students to our university. On behalf of all our faculty and staff members, I welcome you with an open heart.

Since today is a welcome ceremony, I would like to speak somewhat frankly with all of you.

It is certain that the COVID-19 pandemic, which has drastically transformed our day-to-day lives, will be remembered in the annals of human history for a very long time. You could say that we are living amidst a maelstrom of history in the making. Looking back, we have experienced six infection peaks in Japan up to this point.

The first wave of infections happened from March through April in 2020, and the entrance ceremony for our new third-year students was cancelled. Classes began two weeks late, and were conducted online. Most faculty members had not had prior experience with online classes up to that point, and they were also new to students, so everyone was trying to figure out what to do at the beginning.

For our new second-year students, the period from the year-ending third wave, two years ago, up until the fourth wave, which started last March, was when you took the entrance examination and were admitted to university. You must have gone through a very difficult time with the pressure of the entrance examination, as well as the fear that you might not be able to take it. In addition, as infections had not come under control, we were forced to cancel the entrance ceremony for new second-year students, as well.

Afterward, the fifth wave occurred in August last year, followed by the sixth wave, which has been spreading since January.

Looking back on this situation, since spring two years ago, we have continually been at the mercy of the ebb and flow of COVID-19.

Due to COVID-19, you have been unable to experience campus life as you had imagined it. Your part-time jobs shut down, you have been unable to be satisfied with club activities, it seems difficult to do the study abroad programs you had considered, and even if you complain to someone, the reply is, "It can't be helped." I am sure that you have been living from day-to-day with the feeling that your life was not supposed to be like this.

During this time, while working to prevent infections, Saitama University has continued its education and research activities and provided academic support. However, from a public health perspective, we have had to restrict various activities both on and off campus so that you yourselves are not infected, and to prevent the spread of infections to the general public. Although we are trying to prevent infections, this has caused you to lose opportunities to interact with your friends and teachers, and you have been forced to live a life that is far removed from normal university life. For that, I am deeply sorry.

If I reflect on my own life, there have been several times when I have encountered situations over which I had no control. In addition, I have witnessed many people whose lives have been at the mercy of natural disasters, the world's economic situation, and social conditions. In recent times, the Great East Japan Earthquake comes to mind. Even now, there are people whose lives are in danger because their human rights have been trampled on by conflict and war.

Over the course of a long life, you have to consider that you will encounter situations that can be described as unfair, such as the current pandemic. At the same time, it is important that you develop the ability to recover from those situations. The word "resilience," which expresses "the ability to recover" and "adaptability," has often been used in recent years. In the field of psychology, resilience means a mindset for overcoming various obstacles and recovering from crises. Now, I believe that a time has come for us when we must build resilience for recovering from the damage that we suffered due to COVID-19, at both an individual and societal level.

A newspaper recently published an article from a student who will graduate this year. After this student mentioned the pain that they had suffered, they wrote: "This April, I will become a working member of society. With my pockets stuffed full of frustration, anger and despair, and armfuls of memories riddled with self-restraint, face masks and computers, I will set out into the world. My life is just beginning. From the spring, once again, I want to do my best." This article left a strong impression on me. Despite unbearable frustration and the feeling that our situation was not supposed to be like this, I felt relieved by the long-term perspective and flexibility of this student, who expressed, "My life is just beginning."

The American Psychological Association, listing things which are important for overcoming life's unexpected obstacles, mentions "building relationships with others," "having goals," and "taking care of your health," as well as "asking others for help."

Going forward in your student life, you need to have the resilience and flexible strength to consider what you can do in the face of unfair situations and conflicts, and at the same time, to ask others for help depending on the circumstances. At Saitama University, Office of Advising Services for International Students (OASIS) and Health Service Center, as well as the faculty members at the Faculties and Graduate Schools, are ready to talk with you. If you have any problems, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Your lives are just beginning. In the course of your future university life, I hope that all of you will tackle your academic studies head-on, overcome difficulties by engaging in various activities, and develop even further. In order for you to do so, we, the faculty and staff members of Saitama University, will support you to the fullest.

Once again, I would like to welcome you all.

Congratulations on your admission to Saitama University.

April 6, 2022

Sakai Takafumi
President, Saitama University

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