

President's Address at the 2023 Saitama University Entrance Ceremony

Ladies and gentlemen, congratulations on your enrollment at Saitama University. Today, we welcome a total of 2,220 students to our academic community, including 1,576 undergraduate students, 616 master's students, and 28 doctoral students. The faculty and staff at our university are honored to welcome you all with open arms. We would also like to extend our heartfelt congratulations to the families and supporters of our new students, who have lovingly nurtured and guided them to this momentous occasion.

Over the past three years, amidst the unprecedented global pandemic of COVID-19, our society has faced numerous challenges. Therefore, we applaud the dedication and perseverance of all students who have pursued their academic and research goals in spite of these obstacles, and who have now become part of Saitama University's undergraduate and graduate programs.

Saitama University has its origins in 1873, when Saitama Prefecture established a training department for teachers. The university was later established in 1949 by integrating three schools: the former Urawa High School; the Saitama Normal School, which evolved from the training department; and the Saitama Youth Normal School. This year marks the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the training department and the 101st anniversary of the founding of the former Urawa High School. Originally established with two faculties, the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the university has since expanded to encompass five faculties and three graduate schools. Approximately 7,800 undergraduate and graduate students study on our campus in Okubo, while around 720 faculty members engage in teaching and research.

The campus where you will study, the Okubo Campus, has become a tranquil place of learning abundant with greenery, more than half a century after its relocation. All of our faculties and graduate schools are gathered here, and at our university, you can explore a wide range of fields of study through the expertise of faculty members with various specialties. Here you will have the chance to broaden your horizons through interactions with students from other faculties with different areas of expertise and international students from all over the world, and I hope that you will take advantage of these opportunities, meet many people, and enjoy various experiences. In addition, our university has established exchange agreements with around 170 universities overseas to build a network of knowledge, so I hope that you will consider expanding your options and studying abroad during your enrollment.

Now, I would like to address all of you who will study and conduct research at Saitama University with a message that I hope you will keep in your hearts. That message is to always maintain a spirit of inquiry and skepticism towards all things, founded upon the pillars of discussion and critical thinking, and to pose questions of your own accord.

From elementary school to high school, the content and methods of learning are closely regulated by the government's curriculum guidelines. In most cases, students are taught to solve problems with definitive answers until they graduate from high school, with the goal of measuring their proficiency. However, with the complex problems of the world, there are countless situations where there is no definitive answer, or where there are multiple correct answers. For example, responses to the novel coronavirus have varied widely depending on cultural differences and individual values. Additionally, while some cultures consider the death penalty to be a form of just punishment, other cultures believe that taking an individual's life, even if the state is the actor, should not be allowed. What is generally considered right in one society is evaluated in reference to certain criteria or principles. However, in other societies, the criteria and principles themselves may differ due to the influences of history, culture, values, or religion, and what is considered right may be only a relative concept. The essence of learning at university is not only to acquire knowledge, but also to recognize that there are problems without answers, to pose valuable questions with awareness of the problems, and explore the answers to those questions; therefore, discussions and critical thinking are essential. Because there is no one definitive answer—and even justice is a relative concept—discussion and the exchange of various opinions and perspectives is necessary.

On the other hand, critical thinking—the ability to question existing knowledge and ideas—is a process that involves analyzing, evaluating, and integrating information to arrive at logical and broad-minded conclusions. Through this process, it becomes possible to grasp complex issues from diverse perspectives and deeper thought. Critical thinking is essential to the advancement of various academic disciplines and is a necessary process to approach the truth in the study of natural sciences and humanities. It is widely known that such thinking has led to the emergence of new innovations by overturning what was once considered a firm truth in conjunction with the progress of research.

Today, we are honored to have Dr. Takaaki Kajita, a graduate of our university's Department of Physics in the Faculty of Science, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2015,

delivering our commencement address. Dr. Kajita discovered neutrino oscillations, in which neutrinos transform into different types while traveling through space. This groundbreaking discovery revealed that neutrinos, which had long been thought to have zero mass, actually possess mass, and as a result, proved the necessity for a revision of the established theory in elementary particle physics. Dr. Kajita's critical thinking and objective evaluation of evidence led to this important discovery, which will go down in history as a remarkable achievement for humanity.

I hope that all of you will strive to study and conduct research at this university with a focus on debate and critical thinking, thereby honing your own thinking and achieving personal growth. Furthermore, I encourage you to challenge yourselves without fear, to acquire knowledge and experience, and to open new doors in life. Such challenges will provide a great source of confidence, fueling further growth and progress.

Saitama University will fully support your academic and research pursuits. If you ever face difficulties or become lost, please remember that you have faculty, staff, senior students, and friends who are here for you, and do not hesitate to seek their guidance and support. At the same time, I hope that you will respect others and extend a helping hand to those who are struggling or suffering. I sincerely hope that you will have a fruitful and fulfilling student life at our university, and that you will not only acquire knowledge, but also grow as human beings.

Congratulations on your enrollment today.

April 3, 2023

Takafumi Sakai
President, Saitama University