

President's Address at the Saitama University Graduation Ceremony for the academic year 2021

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

Today, we acknowledge the graduation and completion of 1530 undergraduate students, 529 Master's students, and 24 PhD students. These totals include 142 international students from China, Korea, Philippines, Vietnam, and Bangladesh.

I am sure that you experienced many difficulties and hardships in order to complete your studies and continue your research amidst the unprecedented situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been ongoing since 2020. I sincerely respect everyone joining us here today who continued to tirelessly push forward, despite the circumstances.

Over these past two years, the world changed drastically due to the spread of an unknown virus. In Japan, the declaration of a state of emergency and other measures restricted the actions of citizens, and economic activities were severely affected. Amidst this situation, the nature of COVID-19 and its infection mechanism gradually became clear, and risk assessment of the virus progressed. However, people had varying perceptions of the threat posed by the spread of the virus, and even among experts, opinions on treatment, medicine, and vaccination were divided. Furthermore, numerous hoaxes and fake news on the Internet contributed to social turmoil, and social fragmentation, such as attacks on other people who did not stay home or follow behavioral guidelines, also became a serious problem. The question of how to implement measures while reconciling them with individual thoughts and beliefs, public and private interests, and the guarantee of privacy, is an issue that necessitates further discussion in the future, as well.

The current state of affairs is complicated and constantly changing, there is uncertainty about what will happen next, and even among experts, there are different views. This sort of situation is called "VUCA." VUCA is an acronym for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. Although this was originally a military term, used to describe the complicated situation after the end of the Cold War, it has since come to be used for society in general. VUCA is particularly noticeable in the event of a serious accident or a catastrophic disaster which causes great damage, such as a major earthquake or typhoon. Not limited to this pandemic, the confusion caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake, especially the various events caused by the meltdown of the nuclear power plant, typified VUCA itself.

Now, our changing entire society is entering the era of VUCA. Over the course of the next few decades, changes are coming; changes to our natural environment, structural changes to industry due to technological innovations in fields such as AI, information, and robotics, and rapid social changes caused by the declining birthrate, an accompanying decrease in the working-age population, and a graying population. A world will come along that we have never experienced, and which we cannot predict by extrapolating from the past. Going forward, this will be the new world that you, our graduates who are entering the workforce, will be living in.

Although the era of VUCA is disconcerting, if you change your perspective, you could also call it an opportunity. A volatile and uncertain world creates space for people to demonstrate performance in various ways, and will make strides in innovation for new development. In addition, a complex and ambiguous world produces diversity, and forms societies which accept that diversity. This means that a vast range of possibilities is opening up before us, and that each of us can design and choose a way of life that we find satisfying. Now, you will be asked: “What do you want?” “What will you do?” and “How will you live?”

I would like to offer two pieces of advice for everyone who will live in this sort of era.

The first is that I would like you to keep learning and thinking in the future.

In the age of VUCA, where new technologies are being developed one after another and the structure of industry is changing, your current knowledge and way of doing things may, in a short time, become useless. That is why you need to be flexible and interested in other fields, in addition to your own area of expertise. Through your studies and research at Saitama University, you have built a foundation of liberal arts knowledge and professional expertise within yourselves. Going forward, I hope that you will continue to gain various experiences, learn even more to update that foundation, and have the courage to take on new challenges in new fields. I would also like you to think for yourself about what you have learned, and remember to refine your own thinking by learning even more.

The second is for you to collaborate and coexist with others. Collaboration means "working together," and coexistence means "living together."

In recent years, initiatives for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—development goals to bring about a sustainable, diverse, and inclusive society—are making progress on all fronts. Each of the areas listed by the 17 SDGs is interconnected, and solutions need to be developed in collaboration with people from different disciplines. To do this, we need to be open to the unknown and things which differ from our own world, and to have the broad-mindedness to be able to fearlessly enter them. This is also true in relationships between people. Understanding people with different backgrounds and values from your own, and living and working together with a diverse array of people, is essential for the future of society and—by extension—your own

future.

Do not be overwhelmed by the swift currents of the times. Constantly learn and think, collaborate with others, establish yourselves, and vigorously move forward in your own lives.

It has been over seventy years since Saitama University was founded. More than 90,000 students have graduated from undergraduate faculties or completed their graduate studies, and are flourishing in a variety of fields. At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, we received support for our students from many alumni. Along with that support, we received comments from alumni, saying "I treasure the days that I spent at Saitama University," and "It's been 38 years since I graduated. I've been able to work up until this age because of the various experiences I had at university." From these messages, I realized that memories of our campus are deeply rooted in the hearts of our alumni, and that their days at the university have served as great assets.

For those of you who are graduating, Saitama University should also be called the "hometown" of your youth. In the future, when you are confronted with difficulties and uncertainty, remember the days you spent studying and researching at our university, and the friends and mentors with whom you shared those days. I am certain that you will be filled with the courage to face tomorrow.

It is my sincere desire that you all move forward with a heart full of hope, and a blazing bright spirit. With that, I would like to conclude the graduation ceremony.

Once again, congratulations on your graduation and course completion.

March 24, 2022

Takafumi Sakai
President, Saitama University