

A Message to Current Students

I, Takafumi Sakai, am honored to introduce myself as the new president of Saitama University. With the start of the new academic year, I would like to send a message to all of you currently enrolled at the university.

As reported daily, the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has now spread not only through Asia, but across the entire world. On March 11, the WHO declared this to be a pandemic: the simultaneous prevalence of a disease in multiple regions of the globe. One of the characteristics of the COVID-19 is that the elderly have severe symptoms while most of those infected show mild symptoms and recover. Because asymptomatic infection is particularly common among the young, there is a risk of their spreading the infection to others without being aware of it. In response to this situation, the government is calling on the public to prevent the occurrence of infection clusters by avoiding the “three Cs”: closed spaces, crowded places, and conversations in close proximity.

After careful consideration based on national guidelines, the domestic and international infection situation, and expert opinions, we have decided to postpone the start of the classes for two weeks and to conduct all lectures via remote learning. I am sure you will understand this decision as public health measures to reduce the risk of infection among students and to prevent Saitama University from becoming an infection hot spot, as well as to allow teaching to continue even if the situation changes in the future. However, we have to say that the situation remains fluid, with concerns persisting that Japan could experience the explosive spread of infections as seen in Europe. Further action may be required depending on the situation, so please pay close attention to all information sent out by the university. Orientation for current students will also be conducted using video streams. Not only classes and orientation but also various other events will be possibly canceled or postponed, and you may feel unsettled by the environment surrounding you that are quite different from before. Please be sure to read the website and follow the instructions issued by the university. The offices of each faculty and graduate school are open, so please contact us by phone if you have any questions.

In addition, we would like to make a request to you. The present situation in Japan, where new infections continue to emerge, is on the verge of a mass outbreak. As is clear from the examples of other countries, once a mass outbreak occurs, the number of critical patients exceeds the capacity of medical institutions, which leads to immediate collapse of the healthcare system. This means that many people will die who could have been saved if a normally functioning healthcare system had been maintained. One of the characteristics of COVID-19 is that young people who are asymptotically infected cause the infection to spread. Students should be aware of the danger that they pose as younger people. Please refrain from going to such places as many people gathering and avoid any non-essential or non-urgent travel. I strongly urge you

to reassess everything that you do, keeping in mind the need to avoid becoming infected or infecting other people.

There are events that you later look back on and recognize as major turning points in the era, even if you were not aware of that when you were in the midst of them. A recent example of this is the Great East Japan Earthquake. The tsunami caused a meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, which for a time was out of control. Even now, the outlook for decommissioning the reactor is unclear, and decades are still needed before things can be fully returned to normal. This accident revealed the dangers of modern science and technology and the inadequacies of the authorities managing them, which undermined confidence in science and technology policy. In retrospect, recognizing the limits of human beings' control over technology has become a turning point in reassessing the way people interact with science. On this occasion, things such as telecommuting, which is being practiced to control the spread of coronavirus, or Basic Income, which provides a certain amount of financial support in cash to the needy and all citizens of the country, have the potential to change the way we work and the future structure of society. In addition, the fact that a global pandemic has arisen in a very short amount of time will surely lead to a great deal of discussion about globalization. Perhaps in the future, the present situation will be spoken of as a turning point in history: before and after the coronavirus pandemic. Rather than taking a superficial view of these events, I encourage you to think about the essence of what is happening now from your own varied perspectives. This will also help train you for your studies.

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), which were also caused by coronaviruses and brought many deaths at the time, are no longer major problems today. The coronavirus disease that is now running rampant will be surely brought under control through human wisdom and cooperation. Although we will have to endure hardship for a time, let us move forward with hope.

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