

March 25-26, 2023

President's Speech for the Commencement of March 2023

Aiji Tanaka, President
Waseda University

Dear Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of Waseda University, it is my great pleasure to congratulate you upon your graduation. We also extend congratulations to your family, relatives, and friends. I am sure that this is a moment you have been waiting for while studying here at Waseda.

Graduation is supposed to be an occasion at which not only graduating students but also their parents and relatives gather and celebrate together. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this year too we had to reduce the size of graduation and invite the graduating students only. We regret having to take these measures. At the same time, we would like you to know that we are all proud of you, who have completed your study at Waseda, accomplished your own goals, and are graduating today.

During this past year, we watched quite a few big sports events through which all the Japanese were excited very much. We were truly encouraged by those top athletes who played very well at WBC, namely World Baseball Classic that was closed only a few days ago, and at World Cup Soccer held last autumn. I was particularly interested in the fact that many of those outstanding baseball players have been playing in Major League Baseball in the United States. Also, 18 out of 26 members of All Japan Soccer Team have been playing in Europe. These facts suggest that it is very effective to live in another world and compete with those outstanding people in order to increase competitiveness. This applies not only to sports but also to all other fields. Please grab a chance to study abroad or work outside your own society after your graduation in order to train yourself in another world so that you will learn so much more and increase your abilities. At the same time, Waseda should be more active and flexible in terms of international brain circulation.

I know that all of you, this year's graduating students, must have many special thoughts, because you suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic over the last three years. It was our great regret that you have not been able to enjoy normal campus life for three years since your sophomore year. However, you have been patient and controlled yourselves so well that no cluster infections have occurred in class. I really appreciate your cooperation and self-discipline.

Some of you might feel that you lost three years that should have been the most fruitful of your student life at Waseda. Please do not think that your experiences of this coronavirus pandemic had only a negative impact, but rather that your difficult experiences with the pandemic have developed you as a human being. You will be stronger and more resilient than other generations of Waseda alumni, precisely because—in contrast to other generations—your generation has experienced a devastating pandemic while young and studying.

Let me mention some examples of cases in which you became more resilient. Despite the pandemic, you students held the Waseda Festival 2020 online successfully, and you held the Waseda Festival 2021 in a hybrid manner that provided for an audience in person and simultaneously delivered the contents of performances online. In 2022, you held the Waseda Festival in face-to-face manner. We are truly proud of you for what you have done for the last three years. All these demonstrate your resilience.

I used the word “resilient” just now. This is rooted in two ideal goals of education at Waseda that I espoused when I became the president in November 2018. One is to foster “intellectual resilience,” and the other is to foster “flexible sensitivity.”

What, then, does “intellectual resilience” mean? Most of the problems human beings are facing today do not have correct answers. Think, for example, about the COVID-19 pandemic, global warming, the growing gap between the poor and the rich, the invasion of Ukraine by Russian military forces that has been prolonged over a year, you name it. No one has a single “right” answer to solve any of these problems.

After you graduate from Waseda and start working in the real world, you will face many new problems to which no one really has a correct answer or optimal solution, although the scale or the impact of those problems may be smaller than those of the coronavirus pandemic. I hope that you will tackle those new unknown problems and find your own solutions to them. The tough-mindedness that impels you to think through a problem to arrive at a solution is what I call “intellectual resilience.”

At Waseda, you have learned how to use your own brain and think thoroughly. In order to do this, it is important to learn from the scholarship of thinkers who have come before us. Ever since the invention of a writing system over 5,000 years ago, human beings have recorded and compiled the essence of their experiences in the form of scholarship. Respect scholarship. Scholarship does not provide answers to unknown new problems, but it records how human beings confronted unknown problems in their

own day. By learning about these human efforts, you have gained relevant knowledge at Waseda with which to address new problems yet to arise.

Another important ideal is to foster “flexible sensitivity.” This ideal encourages our students to accept, understand, and respect people of different nationalities, ethnicities, languages, religions, creeds, genders, and sexual orientations. During the coronavirus pandemic period, we have learned that this pandemic more negatively impacts some people depending on their nationality, ethnicity, and income level. You are acquiring the power of empathy to understand how different backgrounds matter. This understanding develops your power of empathy, or “flexible sensitivity.”

How do you feel about what has been happening in Ukraine for more than a year? It is important to apply “flexible sensitivity” to this kind of situation too. Let us imagine how fearful and uneasy those students from Ukraine studying at Waseda feel now. At the same time, let us imagine how those students from Russia feel as they look at what their own country is doing, and how scared they feel about other people’s perception of them. It is important to empathize with how other people feel and to be considerate of people different from yourself. This ability is exactly what I mean by “flexible sensitivity.”

When I think about the present situation in which Ukrainians have been killed and their human rights have been violated, my feelings of resentment and sorrow are beyond description. As I myself have been studying political science, I can speculate about the reasons why these horrible things have been happening and why it is so difficult to stop this invasion of Ukraine. It pains me to say that we do not have many effective measures to stop it right away. Nor can I contribute to stopping it.

However, the one thing I can and should do as an educator is to request you to remember what you have learned at Waseda. The founder of Waseda University, Mr. Okuma Shigenobu, emphasized three ideals. He advocated “independence of scholarship,” “practical application of scholarship,” and “fostering good citizens,” by which he meant “Do not think of your own interest, your family’s interest, or the interests of one country or nation, but seek to help humankind.” These ideals have a common root in the concept of “flexible sensitivity.” Okuma emphasized the importance of altruism as well as generosity to others. Therefore, violating human rights, oppression of the weak, and betraying other people are all against the ideals of the founder of Waseda University.

In other words, I sincerely hope that everyone who has studied at Waseda becomes a person who never does anything unethical or something a human being should not do. You students of Waseda, as well as we professors and staff of Waseda, have been learning this ideal together at Waseda University, which is a superb higher educational institution holding these lofty ideals I have mentioned. Always remember this.

Finally, let me tell you one more story. Three years ago, in April 2020, when the State of Emergency was issued for the first time in Japan, Waseda University quickly decided to provide financial aid of 100 thousand Yen to each student who was having financial difficulty due to the coronavirus pandemic. The alumni of Waseda started donating money to help students who were suffering. Many alumni mentioned, “I am happy to help Waseda students when they suffer.” In only 10 days, alumni donated more than 100 million Yen, and over one year more than one billion Yen. I feel very proud of Waseda alumni. Remember this impressive story, and please help your younger fellow students when your time comes.

Be confident about what you have learned at Waseda. And be proud of the fact that you completed your studies and your student life at Waseda even during the hardship of the coronavirus pandemic. You have a bright future in front of you.

Even after you graduate, please come back to visit your alma mater. Our doors are always open to you. We look forward to seeing you again as you become ever-more impressive; and for our part, we strive to make Waseda University an ever-more shining alma mater of which you can be proud.

Congratulations on your graduation, our newest alumni!