

President's Speech for the Commencement of March 2024

March 25-26, 2024

Aiji Tanaka, President
Waseda University

Dear graduates and distinguished guests,

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, considering that various infectious diseases are still spreading, this year too we had to reduce the size of the graduation ceremony 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.

I know that all of you, this year's graduating students, must have many special thoughts, because most of you entered Waseda University at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020. It was our great regret that we could not hold the entrance ceremony for incoming students that year.

You had to take almost all your classes online throughout the academic year of 2020-2021. Although we gradually increased the number of face-to-face classes from April 2021, you still were not able to enjoy a normal campus life for about three years. For example, we could not allow you to hold student parties up until April 2023. This was the case not only for undergraduate students but also for graduate students and students of the Art and Architecture School.

However, you were patient and controlled yourselves so well that no cluster infections occurred in Waseda classes. I really appreciate your cooperation and self-discipline.

In this way, your campus life was very negatively affected by the COVID-19. Some of you might feel that you lost the most important part of your student life at Waseda that should have been very fruitful. 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 allowed you to develop 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.

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 one correct answer. Think, for example, about the COVID-19 pandemic, global warming, the growing gap between the poor and the rich, and wars or armed conflicts that continue to kill so many people all over the world, 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 or violations of human rights due to armed conflicts mentioned above. 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 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 armed conflicts or war, violations of human rights, and severe political divisions? Why do people have to confront each other so aggressively? If all people can think and look at things from the perspectives of other people who are in different circumstances, then the world of human beings would be much more peaceful. Therefore, it is important for you to foster “flexible sensitivity.”

In addition, I added a third ideal goal in 2022. That is “responsive reasoning.” This encourages us to listen to other people who have different opinions from ourselves, and to engage in deliberations with them in order to enhance each other’s intellectual abilities. I wish you, who have studied at Waseda University, to have confidence in your intelligence, and at the same time, to pay due respect to the intelligence of others.

I am sincerely hoping that you will cherish the importance of “intellectual resilience,” “flexible sensitivity,” and “responsive reasoning,” and utilize these ideals in your future life. If you keep these ideal goals in your mind and work in your own society or the world at large, then the world will be more

peaceful and equitable. These ideal goals are, in fact, based on the ideals of the founder of Waseda University.

The founder of Waseda University, 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.” In other words, the most important ideal of the founding fathers of Waseda University is to “foster and educate students who will contribute to human beings throughout the world.” For this reason, we need education. Then, as Okuma thought that education at Waseda must be based on scholarship, he emphasized “practical application of scholarship.” Furthermore, Okuma advocated the “independence of scholarship,” because he thought that scholarship must be independent of political power, of the power of money, and of the desire for fame.

Waseda University is at present striving to foster and educate global leaders who will contribute to humankind throughout the world. However, at Waseda when we envisage a global leader, it is not necessarily a person who is working for an international organization such as the United Nations or for an international corporation. No matter how small a village or town in which a person lives, and no matter how small an NPO or company a person works for, they are regarded at Waseda as a global leader if they always think of humankind throughout the world. I trust that you will all be global leaders in this sense.

I have two final things to tell you. Since most of you did not experience an entrance ceremony when you were freshmen, and have not had a normal student life, we would like you to keep on creating good memories of Waseda. To facilitate this, we have decided to invite you to Waseda’s Homecoming Day in five years. Up until now, we have only been inviting alumni 15 years after their graduation to attend Homecoming Day. However, we shortened this interval down to five years. You will be invited to Homecoming Day in October 2028.

In order for us to keep informing you of many events including

Homecoming Day, I would like to ask you to set up an automatic transfer of the emails you receive via My Waseda to your own private email address, such as Gmail. Then, you can receive information and notifications from Waseda regardless of where you live or which company you are working for.

I have one last piece of advice I would like to give to you, our graduates. That is, do not be swayed by trends, but rather find your interest or passion and pursue it. Trends die out in five years or so, and even if you followed the trend, if it is not something that stirs your curiosity, you will only be able to exert 80 to 90% of your potential. Devoting yourself to something you find meaningful will allow you to put in 120%. It is undoubtedly clear that an effort made at 120% will have a more successful outcome than an effort made at 80%. I used to share these words with my zemi students every year, but ever since becoming the president of the university, I have bestowed them upon all Waseda graduates.

Please have confidence in what you have learned at Waseda, because you have survived the difficult academic environment brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. You can live well with this confidence.

Even after you graduate, please come visit your alma mater. We are looking forward to welcoming back an ever-more brilliantly shining you, to an ever-greater Waseda.

Congratulations on your graduation!