

March 25, 2021

President's Address for the Academic Year 2020 Graduation Ceremony

Yuji Oie, President, Kyushu Institute of Technology

It is a joyous occasion for our university to hold the 2020 graduation ceremony today. First, I would like to congratulate all of you who are embarking on promising careers. I would also like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to the proud parents, guardians and other family members who have provided the graduates with material and emotional support during their paths leading up to this point.

The global spread of the novel coronavirus infection (COVID-19) over the course of a little more than one year has resulted in the infection of more than 100 million people around the world. I am sure that you have all endured various hardships in your studies and research activities in the midst of the many restrictions that have been introduced to prevent infections. I would like to express my deepest respect to you all who have overcome adversity to greet your graduation ceremony today.

The impact of the pandemic has been enormous indeed, with the White Paper on International Economy and Trade 2020 stating that, “the world is facing the worst economic crisis in the postwar period.” In a report published by the World Economic Forum in July 2020 it is noted that 70% of countries globally have been faced with some level of stay-at-home requirements, and that during this period, internet use grew by as much as 70%, with the use of virtual network collaboration tools increasing by more than 600%. The same report also notes that an estimated 10% of the global labor force has been able to work remotely, and that up to 100 million school-age children and up to 200 million university or higher education students have been able to maintain access to education remotely. It is fortunate indeed that it has been possible to sustain certain activities to a certain degree through IT. At the same time, however, the pandemic has highlighted the harsh realities of the digital divide, with many people living in environments where they are unable to make full use of digital technology for work or learning.

The ways in which we work, learn, and live our lives have all been greatly impacted. I believe that people from all walks of life have also found their thinking and values to have been significantly influenced as a result of their various experiences. Due to changes in our way of thinking and sense of values, even after the pandemic subsides there is a very real possibility that various social and economic activities will never be the same again. However, we should be aware that it is we humans, not viruses, who have the will to make decisions, make choices, and carry

them out. As history scholar Yuval Noah Harari observes, what the ultimate impact of the pandemic will be is not predetermined—it is up to us. Everything hinges on the choices and actions we take.

It is against this backdrop that in Japan the next Science, Technology and Innovation Basic Plan is currently being deliberated, which will set out the direction the country should take over the five-year period from fiscal year 2021. The draft plan notes the importance of reassessing the value and role of science and technology in the midst of the spread of COVID-19, and of finding solutions to challenges that create social value, while questioning individual values and global-level values.

As expectations of science and technology continue to rise, you are all likely to become involved in the creation of various solutions. As you engage in such work, I would like you to understand that the systems, cultures, and technologies that support our society are not the product of any single country, region, or culture alone, but represent the coalescence of the shared influence and contribution of various activities in many countries and regions. Furthermore, in the future, many more issues will inevitably arise that cannot be solved by a single country or region alone, and in order to find solutions we will need to make efforts to gather a diversity of knowledge from people with diverse ways of thinking and values. It is my sincere hope that rather than isolation and division, you will choose to learn from and collaborate with just such a diverse range of people.

To conclude my farewell address, I would like to wish you all great success as you embark on your future careers. It is my hope that drawing on the positive experiences and encounters that you have accumulated here at Kyutech, you will enjoy life, and continue to feel, think and learn broadly and be active in society in these fast-changing times. Once again, my heartiest congratulations.

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