

2022 Fall Commencement Address

It is my great pleasure to be with you today here at our Millennium Hall, as we celebrate your graduation from Nara Institute of Science and Technology. Let me begin by congratulating each member of this graduating class, on which I have just conferred 23 master's and 37 doctoral degrees.

The successful completion of a postgraduate degree is a challenging task, even in the best of times. During this global pandemic, you all have been striving with remarkable resilience, perseverance and, above all, courage. Some of you may now be recalling the sacrifices you made, lack of sleep, working in the lab on weekends, missing family and friends back home. Your presence here today is testimony to what you have overcome and what you have achieved during your time here at NAIST.

In addition to celebrating your accomplishments, I would like to congratulate all the people who have helped and supported you throughout your study at NAIST, our faculty members and staff, your family and friends. Not all of them are here today, but why don't we give them a round of applause!

Today, you are leaving this campus and starting a new phase of your career, where your graduate training at NAIST will come into its own. Facing the unprecedented, multiple challenges, such as pandemics, wars and conflicts that have also jolted the global economy, the world is waiting for you to join the force. It is said that we are in the era of VUCA, an acronym for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. Along with the excitement of starting a new journey, some of you may feel uneasy, worrying how you can walk through such trying times.

I have three pieces of advice that I would like to pass on to you before departure. They have been helping me since I finished graduate school and will help you from today.

First of all, be optimistic. You may have already learned during your thesis research how important it is to be optimistic, as research experience is full of VUCA; volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. If you try to discover something new before anybody else, you don't know what you are looking for, how you can find it, and when the moment of discovery comes. Sometimes, you feel lost, fallen into a pitfall, or scared that you would never complete your degree. Without some optimism, you would not have been able to travel such a lengthy, bumpy trail toward the goal today.

The French philosopher Alain said, “Pessimism comes from the temperament, optimism from the will.”

In other words, optimism does not necessarily come from the temperament, and we need to be determined to be optimistic during difficult times.

Pessimism easily infiltrates into our mind, and only the will to optimism can counteract it.

My second advice for you is co-creation, the key concept in my President’s Vision 2030. You don’t have to struggle alone. You can work and collaborate with others to create innovations and innovative solutions to difficult problems. Joseph Schumpeter is one of the most influential economists of the 20th century and he pointed out that innovation is created by a new combination of existing technologies or knowledge.

By working together with somebody who has knowledge, experience, insight, or perspective different from yours, you and your teammates have a better chance to discover ‘a new combination’ that leads to innovative ideas.

I am a molecular biologist by training. In biology, a product of assorted genes from two distinct organisms is called ‘recombinant’.

For example, each of us is a recombinant created by a new assortment of genes from mom and dad and therefore, is a unique creation in the family tree. “Recombinant innovation” is created by bringing together ideas, abilities and skills of more than one person. The molecular biologist François Jacob, a Nobel prize laureate, famously said “To create is to recombine”.

The last tip of my advice is to make the most of the present moment. Rather than regretting what had already happened and worrying about the unpredictable future, think of what you can do now and do it now. Let me share with you my favorite piece of writing by the American historian Alice Morse Earle:

The clock is running.
Make the most of today.
Time waits for no man.
Yesterday is history.
Tomorrow is a mystery.
Today is a gift.
That's why it is called the present.

The present moment is the only window of opportunity given to us. Only in movies, we can go back to the past or the future to fix things. Seize the day, as only what we do now matters.

In years to come, I look forward to seeing you as our proud alumni and hearing if any of my advice has served you.

Every fall, we organize the Homecoming Day with the NAIST Alumni Association, a platform for the global network of our over 10,000 alumni. Please keep in touch.

Again, congratulations to our newest alumni. I wish that the joy and pride of this memorable day will encourage you throughout your life.

Go and outgrow your limits!