

Fall 2024 – President’s Commencement Address

Let me begin by offering my sincere congratulations to you, the members of this graduating class, on which I have just conferred 27 Doctoral degrees and 21 Master’s degrees. With commendable enthusiasm and perseverance, you all have been striving toward one of the life milestones you have reached today. We could not be prouder. Well done!

While we are here to celebrate your achievements today, there is no better time to show appreciation to everyone who has supported and stood by you during your time at NAIST. Let us take this opportunity to thank your parents, families, and friends, as well as our esteemed faculty and dedicated staff. Not all of them may be here, but why don’t we give them a round of applause?

When you think of your days at NAIST today and later in life, I hope you will reflect on the amazing journey you have just completed and what you will carry with you from NAIST into your careers. Last month, I visited Thailand and Indonesia to attend their alumni association meetings, where I had opportunities to speak with a number of our graduates. They enthusiastically talked about their extraordinary NAIST experience and how it impacted their lives. Some remembered all their sacrifices to complete their degrees, such as the lack of sleep, working in the lab on weekends, and missing family and friends back home. They told me, however, that all those experiences are now part of their precious asset in pursuing their personal and professional futures.

Your presence here today demonstrates your qualifications to join those NAIST alums. Your invaluable experience during graduate training will serve the future of your life, our lives, our nations, and our world. Dennis Gabor, a Nobel Prize awardee in Physics in 1971, wrote in his book, “The future cannot be predicted, but futures can be invented. It was man’s ability which has made human society what it is.” As the products of the NAIST education and experience, you are the ones who invent and create futures.

Our planet faces multiple imminent issues and problems, such as climate change, food crises, and new infectious diseases, which could lead to calamity. Inventing and creating better futures to steer the globe onto the right path will not be easy. More revolutionary science and technology, or some call them “disruptive” science and technology, are awaited. On the other hand, a paper published in the journal Nature last year analyzed millions of scientific publications and patents for their citation patterns. It concluded that papers and patents are becoming less disruptive. The study attracted significant attention worldwide as an alarming message to academic institutions and funding agencies.

Obviously, however, citation metrics for individual papers are not the only way to evaluate the disruptiveness of science and technology. More and more transformative innovation is happening through the aggregated efforts by global communities of researchers and industry. In addition, innovations should be assessed for their ability to solve problems in our society and advance the human condition. Unfortunately, revolutionary developments in science and technology are not always immediately welcomed and accepted because they appear, at least to some people, to be “disruptive” to traditional values. The Industrial Revolution in 19th-century England sparked unrest and concerns among textile workers, leading to the Luddite movement that opposed the use of automated machinery. Indeed, ‘Luddites’ often appear when transformative innovations are introduced; you may recall that there have been those opposed to mRNA vaccines and generative AI.

In other words, if we are willing to create game-changer innovations that make this world a better place, we must challenge the existing framework of our thinking and the common sense of the era. As you know, geocentrism was common knowledge in medieval Europe, but nobody believes it now. We should not take anything for granted. American philosopher Frederic Jameson famously said, “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.” Indeed, capitalism is now our common knowledge, and we don’t know any better alternative. However, with sustainability as our immediate social and global goal, even capitalism and the growth it seeks may need to be questioned, as some people have begun to discuss.

With a scientific mind trained at NAIST, you know how important it is to pose a question. A question is a powerful means leading to creativity. In addition, through your thesis research, you have endeavored to expand the boundary of humanity’s knowledge. With such training and experience, you are now ready for new challenges, contributing to the development of a sustainable society and a sustainable planet in one way or another. The world may not know our newest alums yet, but they count on you. Make us proud! Today, you are joining over 10,000 alums who have also been trained here at NAIST and are trying to invent and create futures.

Once again, congratulations! We are truly proud of what you have accomplished and even more proud of what you will achieve in the years to come. May your future be rewarding and fulfilling!

Go now and outgrow your limits!