



ITO Maiko shown running a cell-cultivation experiment in a laboratory. “Even if one test produces a good result, I have to repeat it twice or more in order to write a research paper. It’s a very long path to travel, but it’s fun.”

BOOSTING RECURRENT EDUCATION THAT BUILDS THE FUTURE

To create new value in an era of unpredictability, it is essential to keep returning to school to update one’s skill set. A woman who—while continuing her career in entertainment—has been studying preventive medicine since entering university in her mid-40s, talks about the significance and joys of recurrent education.

“I keep hitting a wall at various points in my studies, but overcoming it is fun.”

So says ITO Maiko, an actress who has been in the entertainment world since debuting in her teens. Through her job, she came across the field of preventive medicine and it sparked her interest. To learn about the subject more deeply and give something back to society,

she entered the e-school at Waseda University’s Faculty of Human Sciences, a correspondence course with most of its lectures available online. However, Ito found that balancing her studies with her career and family was not an easy task. Her physical condition occasionally suffered as she burned the midnight oil, trying to complete her school reports

alongside her regular job. She also had the misfortune of having a seminar on preventive medicine canceled because the professor who had taught the subject retired.

And yet, Ito did not give up. Whenever she bumped against a wall, she returned to her original intent and asked herself, “Why did I want to start learning at university? I still haven’t acquired

the skills to give something back to society, have I?”

Having the longest healthy life expectancy of any country has motivated many Japanese people to study and continue to acquire and refine skills to lead their long lives more actively. The Council for the Creation of Future Education, established by Prime Minister KISHIDA Fumio last December, and in which Ito also participates, is proposing that Japan create an environment that encourages recurrent education and advocating the



Balancing academia and work is far from easy, but Ito has had support from those around her. She advocates changes to society that would make recurrent education easier to pursue. Top: She was appointed “traffic safety ambassador” through her acting job. MAINICHI NEWSPAPERS Bottom: Ito at the graduation ceremony for her master’s degree.

transformation of society.

Every time Ito overcomes a difficulty, a new world opens up for her. The seminar that she took on robotics to replace the canceled one on preventive medicine revealed a new path for her when she heard that robots could prevent the decline in motor function associated with aging. Using this knowledge, Ito developed a device that allows seniors to perform squats properly, thereby helping prevent musculoskeletal decline. That led her to pursue a master’s degree and then work with a company to develop a more advanced preventive-care robot called LocoPyon. The robot talks to seniors to boost their motivation and performs squats with them.

When Ito subsequently decided to pursue a doctorate, she enthusiastically approached her professors about switching the subject of her research to basic gerontology. She currently spends her days conducting cell-cultivation experiments to find foods that slow aging.

“To use our skills to solve social challenges, we need to go back to school. Recurrent education has also changed my values. Studying in a different field is stimulating, and I believe my positive approach will help me contribute to society.”

However, Ito points out that the way that higher education is designed may be an issue when it comes to increasing the number of adult learners. Regardless, she has high hopes. “I would expect the government to create a more encouraging environment,” she

added, “such as by lowering tuition, introducing more diverse fields of study, and engaging in more proactive efforts to add online classes.” In response to the Council for the Creation of Future Education’s suggestion, the Japanese government’s Basic Policy on Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform 2022 has included such activities as visualizing the results of adult education and supporting the development of programs addressing the needs of future growth areas.

As a practitioner of recurrent education, Ito hopes to give back to society by becoming a messenger and talking about her own experience. “When I entered university in my mid-40s, a future that I hadn’t imagined opened up to me. The more I learn, the more I equip myself with new tools. I want people to know the importance of developing new interests and taking on new challenges.” ●

Ito emphasizes the importance of recurrent education at the Council for the Creation of Future Education, to which she belongs. ASAHI SHIMBUN

