Signs of the Times: Change or be Changed?

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Your Excellency the Chancellor, Hon’ble Pro-Chancellor, Respected Vice Chancellor, Prof Pillai, Members of the Syndicate and Academic Council, Graduates, Colleagues, Eminent Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It is both an honour and a privilege to speak at the third Convocation of the Tamil Nadu Open University (TNOU). A Convocation is a very important milestone in the life of an institution and I thank the Vice Chancellor, Prof Palanichamy for this opportunity to represent the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). At the previous Convocation held last year, our President and CEO, Sir John Daniel was the Chief Guest. This clearly demonstrates COL’s deep interest in the progress of the TNOU in its efforts to provide quality education to its nearly 100,000 learners of whom significantly, 55% are women!

2. When Heads of Government decided to set up the Commonwealth of Learning in 1987, they saw this as an imaginative response to strengthening higher education in the developing world by making use of the potential of open, distance and technology enhanced education. Traditional teaching methods simply cannot cope with the scale and diversity of learning needs.

3. Today, the majority of people in the developing Commonwealth are under the age of 20. By the year 2020, 40% of the global workforce will be knowledge workers, with a need for tertiary qualifications. Powerful global regulators such as The World Bank, are of the view that for countries to achieve sustainable economic development, the Age Participation Rates (APR’s) in Higher Education (HE) must be in the region of 40 to 50%, as they are in many developed countries.

4. With access to HE being less than 10% of the relevant age group in India, the expansion in distance education institutions seems to be a natural solution. India alone has fourteen open universities and 126 dual mode institutions that offer over 4000 courses to about 5 million students. There are approximately 5000 study centres and 70,000 academic counselors/tutors that provide tutorial support to the distance learner in this country.
5. It would be worthwhile at this stage to reflect briefly on the rapid changes that are taking place in distance education. What began in the nineteenth century as correspondence studies has now evolved into an integral component of mainstream educational provision almost universally. Even though distance education has had an existence of over 150 years, it is only in the last forty years that its growth has been so phenomenal.

6. In 1988, the year COL started its operations, there were only ten open universities across the Commonwealth of which three were located in Canada. Today there are 24, most of them in Asia and Africa, with only one remaining in Canada. With 81% of face-to-face institutions in North America offering blended learning options¹, it is clear that there is an increasing convergence of distance and face to face education. While this may be the case in the developed 'north', traditional open and distance learning, is now making great strides in the developing world. In Africa, there was only one open university in 1988; today there are four!

7. It would be useful to make a brief reference to the applications of technology in distance education to make this historical perspective complete. The last five years have seen tectonic shifts in how technology is being used within the academy. Pioneered by the MIT, the Open Courseware movement, based on the principle of knowledge sharing marks the first generation in which knowledge is seen as our common wealth. The online course materials of the UK Open University is the second generation wherein existing self-instructional materials are being put into online format. The third generation is collaborative course development as exemplified by the wikiEducator, an authoring tool being used to develop course materials collaboratively. The COL-supported wikiEducator is emerging as a dynamic and collaborative tool of free content development. In this phase, the focus is shifting from 'this courseware is mine to this courseware is for (open) mining'².

8. Having set out the broad historical perspective, I shall turn to the themes that now dominate the ODL discourse. The most important among them, of course, is its place and relevance in the 21st century. The higher education landscape of the 21st century is significantly different from that of previous centuries. There are more entrants to higher education today than at any time in the past. Higher education has, in fact, evolved from an elitist pursuit into a mass system.

9. The pressure of numbers is one thing that traditional institutions are not equipped to cope with. Their capacities can never be raised to respond to the ever-increasing demand. What then is the alternative? Establish systems that are not critically dependent on traditional physical infrastructure. ODL fits the bill. In the 21st century, therefore, the campus based and ODL systems have to co-exist, each complementing and supplementing the other, in ways that can respond to the rising demand. And that answers the question about the place and relevance of ODL.

10. In some ways, it also settles the question of the status of ODL in the coming years. It can no longer be a poor cousin of formal, traditional higher education. It has to become an integral part of the total educational context, irrespective of the development profile of any country, and, if I can indulge in envisioning the future, ODL as a separate category of educational provision might even disappear. We may simply refer to it as 'learning' in a generic sense, regardless of specific delivery modes!
11. It is not so much the relevance of the methods that should engage our attention as the relevance of the content and processes. What is taught and how, is just as important. This would call for a great deal of reform and renewal of the curricular offerings of most institutions of higher education especially in our country. You will be pleased to know that in a recent report on State Open Universities commissioned by COL, TNOU is commended on the 'good design of special programmes like livelihoods education'³. The TNOU, in partnership with industry is taking steps to ensure that prior learning and skills are recognized through appropriate certification. TNOU plans to reach out to rural communities through livelihoods training and has already won a prestigious French Award for women's empowerment. I take this opportunity to compliment you, the faculty and students of TNOU, on this splendid achievement.

12. What of the learners in these changing times? Today, half of the world's population of 6.5 billion is under 20. There are two billion teenagers in the developing world alone. This 'new learner' is a 'digital native', a twenty-something, who takes to technology as fish to water. This is in contrast to the 'digital migrant'⁴ the adult who has adopted technology relatively later in life. According to Wood and Zurcher, the 'new learner' seeks immediate gratification rather than delayed responses; prefers fun rather than suffering; wants education that is meaningful and relevant to real life and would much rather have social relations and interactivity than isolation.⁵

13. The 'new learner' may be the adult who needs continuing professional development combined with full-time employment. The traditional university student is the young adult between the ages of 18 to 24. Today, half the students of TNOU are in the age-group of 25-35 and about 15% are over the age of 35. The 'new learner' belongs to a very diverse constituency and has a range of needs that the traditional institution thus far has never known.

14. We also need a 'new teacher' to cater to the needs of the 'new learner'. The focus is now on i) creative and innovative thinking rather than memorisation; ii) using different ICT tools rather than relying only on the printed text; iii) encouraging multiple perspectives rather than looking for the "right" answers; iv) helping learners construct knowledge for themselves, and most importantly v) sharing best practice. Most academics are 'digital migrants', while the many they teach are 'digital natives'. If the digital migrants think learning is work and the natives are convinced that learning should be fun, how will the twain ever meet? Teachers face a radical challenge as they prepare to meet the new learner. As access to communities becomes increasingly networked, we see yet another shift taking place. Are we moving from 'constructivism' to 'connectivism'?⁶

15. Technology has caused a revolution in the ways we teach and learn but there can be no real revolution unless the faculty changes the ways in which (how) they teach.⁷ A student in Senegal noted: 'Our teachers because of our participation in collaborative projects and Internet access, have to do a better job. They carefully prepare their lessons before coming to class. We challenge them: we are no longer passive receivers of information. We analyse and question things'.⁸

16. These then are some of the signs of the times. Looking at the rapid changes around him, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania once said:
Decades ago, as President of my country, I told Tanzanians that the choice before them was to change or be changed. I was wrong. There was no choice. They had to change and even so, they would still be changed.

The nature, character and constituency of higher education have changed. These changes are irreversible; how well are we prepared to cope? Is there an inevitability about change as President Nyerere's words suggest? Are there any options beyond 'change or be changed'? Will we be swept along in a deterministic stream? Or do we have the power and agency to determine the course of this change? What will prepare us?

17. First, knowledge itself is power, as Bacon wrote centuries ago. At no time in human history have we had so much knowledge and information within such easy reach. Experience, however, has shown that knowledge by itself is not power, it is power only when we use it. Are we ready and inclined to use the knowledge of what is going on around us?

Second, let us not forget the lessons of history. History is a valuable foundation upon which to build the edifice of the future.

Third, crisis generates creativity. The pace of change and the various shapes it takes leaves us in a constant state of crisis. This encourages us to look for innovative solutions and radical strategies to deal with the challenges that face us.

Fourth, it is clear that the future lies in partnerships, collaborations and networking.

We can either be carried away by the change around us or be changed regardless. Or as educated citizens, we can actively influence and shape the course of that change. We do have a choice. Let us seize it.

18. On that note, let me sincerely congratulate all of you who graduate today. May this New Year and all ensuing ones bring you peace, prosperity and progress. Thank you for your attention.
References


