

What is an Open University?



*TAMIL NADU OPEN UNIVERSITY, Convocation, 11
January 2007, Address by the Chief Guest*

Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning

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Transcript

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Graduates, Academic Colleagues, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is an honour to be Chief Guest at this Convocation ceremony. India was instrumental in establishing the Commonwealth of Learning when Rajiv Gandhi was your Prime Minister so my colleagues and I give special importance to working here. We follow the fortunes of the Tamil Nadu Open University - and of all India's open universities - with particular interest.

India is the largest country in the Commonwealth, with a population as large as that of all the other 53 Commonwealth countries put together, and your foreign policy gives a special place to the Commonwealth. Most importantly for us, however, India's education policy attaches unusual importance to distance learning at all levels.

At the moment some 24% of the ten million Indians engaged in higher education are learning at a distance: in the Indira Gandhi National Open University; in 12 State open universities like this one; and in the many dual-mode providers. The Government wants to raise this figure to 40%. Moreover, India's commitment to distance learning extends beyond the university level. The National Institute for Open Schooling is the world's largest open school and India is now creating state open schools analogous to its state open universities.

There is intense international interest in open schooling, particularly in Africa. Those countries that are struggling to get all children into primary school cannot aspire to universal secondary schooling in the foreseeable future using conventional methods. They must seek alternatives like open schools. COL often works as an intermediary between India and Africa; helping to share Indian expertise on alternative schooling with African governments.

This is the convocation of the Tamil Nadu Open University, so I shall narrow my focus to a simple question: what is an Open University? I once had the inestimable privilege of serving for eleven years as Vice-Chancellor of the British Open University, the institution that pioneered, and continues to lead, the implementation of the concept of the open university.

In those years as Vice-Chancellor of the UKOU I was inspired by the succession of distinguished people who served as chancellor of the University. The first, Lord Crowther, was Editor of The Economist newspaper. The second, Lord Gardiner, who was the Lord Chief Justice of England, enrolled as an OU student during his time as Chancellor. I began my term as VC during the Chancellorship of Lord Briggs, the social historian, who was also the first chairman of the Commonwealth of Learning. He was succeeded by Lady Boothroyd, the first woman Speaker of the House of Commons. She retired recently after eleven years of service and the present Chancellor is Lord Puttnam, the film producer.

Officiating at convocation ceremonies with such distinguished people beside me was a great privilege. In my own remarks to convocation I often referred back to the speech that Lord Crowther gave at the University's Charter Ceremony in 1969.

In a brilliant address of less than ten minutes he captured the ideals that must inspire all institutions that dare to call themselves open universities. I cannot do better than give you some excerpts.

*"This is the **Open** University", he began. "We are open, first, as to **people**... We took it as axiomatic that no formal academic qualifications would be required for registration as a student. Anyone could try his or her hand, and only failure to progress adequately would be a bar to continuation of studies."*

"The first, and most urgent task before us is to cater for the many thousands of people, fully capable of a higher education, who, for one reason or another, do not get it, or do not get as much of it as they can turn to advantage, or as they discover, sometimes too late, that they need. The existing system, for all its expansion, misses and leaves aside a great unused reservoir of human talent and potential."

"Men and women drop out through failures in the system, through disadvantages of their environment, through mistakes of their own judgement, through sheer bad luck. These are our primary material. To them we offer a further opportunity. Almost we can say, like the Statue of Liberty in New York harbour, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the open door"...There are no limits on persons."

He continued:

*"We are open as to **places**. This University has no cloisters - a word meaning closed...From the start it will flow all over the United Kingdom. There are no boundaries of space."*

*"We are open as to **methods**. The original name was the University of the Air. I am glad that it was abandoned, for even the air would be too confining. We start... in partnership with, the British Broadcasting Corporation. But already the development of technology is marching on, and I predict that, before long, actual broadcasting will form only a small part of the University's output."*

"The world is caught in a communications revolution, the effects of which will go beyond those of the industrial revolution of two centuries ago. Then the great advance was the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's muscles. Now the great new advance is the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's minds."

"As the steam engine was to the first revolution, so the computer is to the second... Every new form of human communication will be examined to see how it can be used to raise and broaden the level of human understanding. There is no restriction on techniques."

And Lord Crowther concluded:

*"We are open, finally, as to **ideas**. It has been said that there are two aspects of education, both necessary. One regards the individual human mind as a vessel, of varying capacity, into which is to be poured as much it will hold of the knowledge and experience by which human society lives and moves. This is the Martha of education - and we shall have plenty of these tasks to perform. But the Mary regards the human mind rather as a fire which has to set alight and blown with the divine afflatus. This also we take as our ambition."*

He pronounced those memorable words nearly forty years ago. You can date his speech precisely because the Open University was formally launched in the week that the cosmonauts returned from the first moon landing in 1969. That was a giant leap for mankind and so, I suggest to you, was the creation of that first Open University.

Open as to people, open as to places, open as to methods, and open as to ideas. Those are inspiring ideals and attractive ambitions. But what happened? Did the UK Open University fulfil the agenda that Lord Crowther set out for it? For the answer to that question I turn to Lady Boothroyd, who stepped down as the UKOU's Chancellor last year, nearly four decades after Lord Crowther's inaugural speech. Let me quote from her valedictory address:

She began:

"I accepted the Chancellorship knowing that the OU is one of the great education achievements of the 20th century and all who work in it are committed to ensuring that it meets the needs of the 21st century. We remain the only publicly funded university in the country to completely ignore entry standards and concentrate entirely on exit standards.

I am proud of the fact that two million people have studied with us since our doors opened and that 203,000 students are studying with us this year. The average age of our students is 32 and I am pleased to know that more than half are women. We also have well over 10,000 students who are disabled, making the OU the country's leading provider for disabled people."

That, you will agree, is a description of a university that is open to people.

Lady Boothroyd's speech did not mention the OU's worldwide reach, but the University's mission of being open as to places has now created partnerships in 50 countries and reaches some 40,000 students outside the UK. Cross-border higher education is a fast-growing phenomenon today and I hope that the Tamil Nadu Open University also sees its mission in international terms, because there is a huge Tamil Diaspora spread all over the world.

But she did report on the Open University's openness to methods. I quote:

"In May 2001 I made my maiden speech in the House of Lords and referred to over 110,000 users of our online facilities - by far the largest online community in the world. The comparable number today has reached 400,000 - a remarkable advance."

I underline Lady Boothroyd's figures by saying all open universities have a special duty to develop and refine the use of technology. All universities now teach online but only the open universities have the scale, the resources, and the commitment to ensure that new technologies are implemented in ways that benefit all students.

This links directly to the last of Lord Crowther's four 'opens': being open to ideas. In their early years most new open universities have neither the resources nor the time to engage much in research, although they should maintain that as a longer-term ambition. They do however, have ample opportunity to do action research on the use of technology in distance teaching.

I quoted earlier Lord Crowther's summary of two perspectives on education: the mind as a vessel to be filled and the mind as a fire to be kindled. Your challenge is to develop the methods of distance learning to situate your teaching at the point you judge appropriate on this spectrum for each course.

The challenge for the Tamil Nadu Open University is to be open in those ways that are most necessary for the people of Tamil Nadu. The UK Open University was challenged to be open as to people, to places, to methods and to ideas. I wish you well as you work to achieve the manifestations of openness that are most appropriate for this environment.

Finally, I congratulate the graduates. You will create the reputation of the Tamil Nadu Open University. I wish you well in the next phases of your lives and I hope that you will carry with you the ideals of openness that I have explored with you.