

Acceptance Speech

upon receiving an honorary Doctor of the University degree



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Thank you for this great honour. I recall visiting the Barbican as a student to watch Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* on a discounted student ticket—which meant sitting behind one of the pillars at the far end and trying to crane my neck around it to catch the critical scenes. Never could I have imagined being on the stage itself in all this splendid finery! Yet such a transformation was possible!

And to receive an honorary doctorate from the Open University itself makes the occasion doubly dramatic to me. As a student at Sussex working on British Marxism and the nineteenth century novel for my doctorate, I went up to Milton Keynes to meet Prof Arnold Kettle, a renowned literary critic, who explained why he'd left his campus university to join the OU. One reason was that he could reach many more students than the confines of the classroom would permit and that he could open up possibilities for them through education. This revelation inspired me to apply to the Indira Gandhi National Open University, when I returned to India. There again, I found that the OU was the model on which India's own institution had been shaped and the OU was always upheld as a symbol of quality. To receive recognition from the OU today is then something truly special.

There is a larger-than-life figure that connects the University of Sussex, the OU and Commonwealth of Learning—he was one of the Vice Chancellor of Sussex, the Chancellor of the OU and the first Chair of the Board of Governors of the Commonwealth of Learning or COL.

We must pay tribute today to the late Lord Asa Briggs, who wrote the report that led to the establishment of COL. COL organizes triennial conferences, the Pan-Commonwealth Forums, and a highlight of these is the Asa Briggs lecture, which celebrates Lord Briggs' great contributions to education in the Commonwealth. The next Pan-Commonwealth Forum will be held in Kuala Lumpur in November this year at which Sir John Daniel, your former Vice Chancellor and my predecessor at COL, will deliver the Asa Briggs lecture. Your Vice Chancellor, Mr Peter Horrocks has very kindly agreed to support this Forum which will make it possible for distance educators from developing countries to participate. Thank you, Vice Chancellor. Thank you Prof Tynan for accepting our invitation to speak at PCF.

What does the Commonwealth of Learning do? Our mission is to help Commonwealth Member States and institutions to harness the potential of distance learning and technologies for expanding access to education and training. COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. Let me give you some examples of how we do this.

The first is the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth or VUSSC. The Commonwealth has 31 small states, which have come together to develop courses which are then freely available to all the

members as Open Education Resources. The National University of Samoa offers the VUSSC developed Diploma in Sustainable Agriculture. The first group of students who graduated have already found full-time employment. One graduate of this diploma is Vaelua who plans to carry her qualifications to the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, where she will pursue a further degree. This affordable course opened up possibilities for quite a number of persons like Vaelua.

My second example is COL's Lifelong Learning for Farmers project. Under this initiative, which is being implemented in seven countries, COL catalyses the links between civil society, experts and financial institutions to develop multi-media based distance learning. Research shows that for every dollar invested, income and assets worth \$9 have been generated among farming communities in India. Through mobile learning, the Batwa community in the remote forests of Uganda learned scientific honey and beekeeping practices which has resulted in two meals a day and opened up new possibilities for their children, who now go to school.

We at the Commonwealth of Learning use technologies that are appropriate, accessible and affordable to reach the last mile. We know that not everyone in the Commonwealth has internet connectivity. To overcome this, COL developed Aptus a low-cost offline virtual classroom that provides learners in isolated islands in Kiribati and remote mountains in Pakistan with access to digital resources. Working with partners in the University of South Pacific, IIT Kanpur and UNESCO, COL offered a MOOC on Climate Change. COL has also helped develop a Green Teacher programme which ensures that teachers inculcate environmental concerns amongst school children.

Much more needs to be done, especially for girls who are often denied access to education. Khadija, a young girl from Bangladesh tells us 'My father believes that only boys should have an education, not girls. So my father wants me to get married, but I did not want to destroy my life by getting married at an early age. I want to continue my study to become independent because I firmly believe that education can change my social position.' COL is working in five countries towards the schooling of young girls like Khadija so that they do not have to succumb to early and forced marriage but can pursue other possibilities to improve their skills - and their lives.

Distance education and technologies have opened up infinite possibilities for millions across the Commonwealth. Achieving sustainable development remains an aspirational goal for all of us. How can we meaningfully contribute to our own development and that of our societies in a sustainable manner? How can we make this a more prosperous, more equitable world where the futures of coming generations are not compromised?

In closing, allow me to modify the words of the great Wordsworth:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive

But to be an 'OU graduate' was very heaven

And I hope I speak for all of us. Congratulations!