

# Convocation Address

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Open University of Mauritius  
Moka, Mauritius



Professor Asha Kanwar  
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

Honourable Minister, Chairperson, Director-General, Members, Board of Governors,  
Academic Council, Open University of Mauritius, Distinguished Guests, Graduates

Thank you for this great honour which I am proud to accept. This award would not have been possible without the unwavering support I get from the wonderful team at the Commonwealth of Learning and friends from around the Commonwealth who have contributed to my success. This honour also belongs to them.

It is a privilege to become an alumnus of the Open University of Mauritius (OUM), a relatively young institution that has grown so quickly to become a university of choice for the largest number of learners in the country. This assumes particular significance within the context of your Prime Minister the Hon Pravind Jugnauth's recent announcement of free tertiary education at undergraduate level for all. Tertiary enrolment has tripled in Mauritius since 2000 with the GER at 46 % in 2017. With the Prime Minister's initiative this percentage is likely to increase further. Mauritius is to be congratulated for its leadership in showing the way to the rest of the Commonwealth. As per the World Bank, for any country to achieve sustainable development, the GER in higher education should be in the region of 40-50%. In fact, Mauritius, has already consolidated its position as the most competitive economy in sub Saharan Africa.

A Convocation ceremony is a very important milestone in the life of an institution and I am delighted to be a part of this happy occasion. I thank the Director General, Dr Kaviraj Sukon and the Board for the invitation. Let me congratulate you dear students on your well-deserved success. In my view, the students who graduate from a distance learning institution, as you have done, are any employer's dream. Instead of studying full time, you have often balanced the requirements of study with your family responsibilities and job requirements. It is because of your motivation, discipline and commitment that you are here today to receive your hard-won qualifications. Let us not forget the support and sacrifices made by your families.

Some of you are already in employment while others will be seeking it. What are the options? A McKinsey report points out that 'employers, education providers and youth live in parallel universes' and very often these worlds do not meet (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012). Over 50% of the youth surveyed did not believe that their education would lead to employment. Similarly over 50% of the employers did not think that the new graduates had the skills to be

hired even at the entry level. There seems to be a disconnect between what we teach and what is required by the job market. And with advances in technology, the future becomes even more uncertain.

Governments are looking for ways in which young people can be skilled for employment and entrepreneurship. 22.7 percent of the population in Mauritius is young—between the ages of 15 to 24--and the unemployment rate for young people here at 6.9% is half of the global average of 13.23%. In order to reach large numbers, policy makers around the developing world realized that traditional brick and mortar solutions would not be enough. They adopted open and distance learning and technologies.

My organization, the Commonwealth of Learning was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government to promote the use of distance and technology enabled learning to enhance access to quality education and training. Mauritius is an active member of the Commonwealth and has been consistent in its contributions, both financial and intellectual. Your Minister the Hon Leela Devi Dookhun played a leading role in the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers held last year in Fiji and shared the pathbreaking reforms that she has led with her fellow ministers.

The Open University of Mauritius has been a long-time partner and this goes back to the early days when the institution was still the Mauritius College of the Air. As a close partner, COL has supported several capacity building activities over the years. OUM offers the Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme as a member of a 11-country consortium and some of you are graduating today. The Open University has led the development of a course on Business for Sustainable Development which other Commonwealth countries can use free of charge. Another joint initiative is the Employability framework which aims to prepare all learners for employment and entrepreneurship.

You have worked hard and you richly deserve your success. As someone who has also graduated as a distance learner, let me share three things. First, the 21st century is very different from the past century in which people from our generation graduated. In our days it was enough to do a degree and find a job which lasted until you retired. Now, research shows that you will be changing at least two to four jobs during your careers—which means you'll have to continue learning throughout life. Second, many times life is not a simple equation, and hard work does not always lead to success. We must also be prepared for failure. As Edison said 'I haven't failed...I've just found 10,000 ways that do not work'. Let's stay positive and persevere until we succeed. In fact, there is no substitute for perseverance. Third, your altitude will depend on your attitude. As you know, intelligence is very important but emotional intelligence is even more valued in today's world. We must develop the skill of empathising with people and understanding their perspective. A positive frame of mind and a can-do approach is what the world of work needs today.

As you graduate today, you are expected to contribute to your family, your community and your country. In addition, you are also global citizens who must contribute to the sustainability and well-being of our planet. Access to decent livelihoods and a life of dignity is fundamental to our future.

And as we know, opportunities for livelihoods do not come from employment alone. Instead of simply being job seekers, can we become job creators? Our educational system must breed and nurture entrepreneurs. We live in a world that values and rewards innovators. Do we need to be born innovators or is this a skill that can be acquired? After studying thousands of innovators, Dyer et al (2013) in their book *The Innovator's DNA* have distilled the skills that all innovators share. These are simple skills: questioning, observing, networking and experimenting. What does this mean?

Innovators ask questions all the time. Asking simple questions can often lead to profound discoveries. Steve Jobs wanted to know why computers needed a fan in the first place and the rest is history. Observing closely is a skill that all innovators share—they try to carefully understand how people, technologies and systems work and arrive at insights and lessons that can be helpful in their own situation. In addition, innovators are great networkers—and here we don't just refer to social networking but meeting with people from different backgrounds and disciplines to explore ideas, which can further trigger new ideas. And finally innovators are always trying out new experiences and solutions. Innovation is a skill that can be mastered and we need to practise the skills of questioning, observing, networking and experimenting systematically until they become part of our DNA.

Innovators are also lifelong learners. So your learning does not end today. You will still need to continue to learn, unlearn and re-learn many different things during the course of your lives. Learning how to learn would be the biggest advantage that you leave with today and this will always stand you in good stead. This is an important skill that OUM has given you.

Let me congratulate you dear students on your well-deserved success. The world awaits and the future beckons. Each one of us can make a difference. And as Mahatma Gandhi said, 'In a gentle way, you can shake the world'.