

Convocation Address

8 June 2019

Athabasca University
Athabasca, AB



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

Madam Chair,
Mr. President,
Distinguished Guests,
Members of the Platform Party
Graduates
Family and Friends:

When I first joined a distance learning institution, the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, I was very impressed with Athabasca as a model of ‘openness’ because of its flexible entry qualifications and focus on reaching remote and unreached learners. I believed we had a lot to learn from you. I had never imagined then that one day I would receive an honorary doctorate from this great institution. Thank you for this special honour. This award would not have been possible without the unwavering support I get from the wonderful team at the Commonwealth of Learning--I’m glad my colleague Doris McEachern is here today, and friends from around the Commonwealth who have contributed to my success. This honour also belongs to them.

Athabasca University has been an early innovator in harnessing the potential of technology. You have empowered tens of thousands of learners to pursue education on their own terms by removing barriers and increasing equality of opportunities for all. Athabasca has proved beyond doubt that there is never a wrong place or time for learning. Your President, Dr Neil Fassina is a very powerful advocate for inclusion and leaving no one behind at various international forums where I had the privilege to meet him

My organization, the Commonwealth of Learning or COL shares similar goals. COL believes that learning is the key to sustainable development. Learning must lead to opportunities for economic growth, social inclusion and environmental conservation. Our strategy is to harness the potential of existing and new technologies to achieve development outcomes.

Athabasca and COL have a long history of working together. We have benefitted a great deal from the expertise of your distinguished faculty and Athabasca holds a COL Chair. In partnership with your institution COL has offered training programmes and courses throughout the Commonwealth and beyond. One learner from Fiji, Edward Eterika, who completed a COL-Athabasca professional diploma in legislative drafting, reports that within a year of program completion, he was re-writing three legislative acts in his country.

All of you who graduate today are our hope and promise of tomorrow. Let me congratulate you on your well-deserved success. In my view, the students who graduate from a distance learning institution, 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.

As someone who was married early as per family tradition, I too graduated as a distance learner, so let me share three reflections. 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 complete a degree and find a job which lasted until you retired. Now, you could be changing at least six to twelve jobs during your careers—which means you'll have to continue to learn 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. Canada is already playing a leadership role internationally on several fronts: climate change, gender equality and fair trade. Athabasca is a world leader in open, distance and online learning. As many developing countries in Asia and Africa are establishing open and distance and elearning institutions, you have much to share with them.

In conclusion, let me remind you of Amber Thomas, an Athabasca University alumna and a Paralympic champion who won two medals at the London 2012 Paralympic Games and was the first blind woman in history to relay swim the English Channel. She said "You can do anything you set your mind to". What an inspiration! This reminds me of the Athabasca advertisement which says: 'If opportunity does not knock, build a door!' With passion and perseverance, the world will be your oyster.

Thank you!