

Convocation Address at KKHSOU

**Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University
India**

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**Presented by
Professor Asha Kanwar
President & CEO
Commonwealth of Learning**

Hon'ble Chief Minister, Prof Andre Beteille, Vice Chancellor, Graduates, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a special privilege to receive a DLitt (honoris causa) at the first Convocation of the KK Handiqui State Open University and I thank the Vice Chancellor, Prof Srinath Barua, the Board of Management and the Academic Council for this great honour.

A Convocation is a very important milestone in the life of an institution and I am really pleased to be a part of this happy occasion. KKHSOU is the youngest among the public open universities in India and the first to serve the Eastern region. Yet even in its short existence, KKHSOU has been providing opportunities to thousands of men and women who are very diverse in terms of age and social background, to gain qualifications ranging from certificates to diplomas, degrees and doctorates through its academic programmes. I'm sure Prof KK Handiqui the great scholar, educator and visionary, in whose name this university was established, is with us in spirit today, and pleased that if the student cannot reach the institution, the institution is reaching the student in remote rural locations through flexible need-based programmes.

Even though access to quality higher education is still a distant dream for many young people globally, the demand continues to grow. If we are to accommodate the children who will reach enrolment age between now and 2025, we will need to build four new universities every single week with a capacity of 30,000 learners per institution.

The pressure of numbers is one thing that brick and mortar institutions are not equipped to cope with. What then is the alternative? Establish systems that are not critically dependent on traditional physical infrastructure. Open and Distance Learning (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.

When Heads of Government decided to set up my organization 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. Over the past twenty six years, we have used distance learning for expanding access to quality secondary schooling, teacher training, skills development and non-formal learning in the different regions of the Commonwealth which cover Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific.

India, like many developing countries of the Commonwealth, believes in open and distance learning. India has 14 open universities and about 250 universities offering distance learning catering to nearly 24% of those who enter higher education in this country. Research shows that there is 'no significant difference' between distance and traditional classroom instruction in terms of learning outcomes; yet there is a lingering perception, especially in the developing world, that distance education is not as effective or adequate as campus-based learning. How do we address this gap in understanding and perception? It is interesting that the perceptions about the effectiveness of distance education in the developed countries are quite different from those in the developing countries. For instance, the Open University of the UK ranks regularly in the top five in the UK for student satisfaction and quality. Similarly in Canada, there is no distinction made between a campus or distance learning qualification. Institutions in the developing world need to do much more to raise the profile and quality of open and distance learning.

I did my masters degree studying at a distance since I was married at the age of eighteen. So distance education provided me with an opportunity I would otherwise not have had. In those days getting a degree was quite enough and it opened many doors for me.

Today the world has changed and knowledge is multiplying at a rapid pace. What we learnt two or three decades ago is just not enough even for survival, let alone for success, in a highly competitive global market. Research indicates that you could have two to four careers in a lifetime. So if you enter the world of work, you will still need to continue to learn, unlearn and re-learn many different things during the course of your life. In short you need to be lifelong learners if you wish to succeed.

We must also be prepared for the skills that are required to succeed in the 21st century. Speaking at a conference in Maastricht in 2009, Sam Pitroda then at the National Knowledge Commission said that to succeed in the 21st century, Indian students require certain skills. They must be analytic, innovative, ethical, disciplined and respectful. Let me also add that our learners need skills to be global citizens who proactively promote peace and environmental sustainability.

There is a great deal of emphasis on skills development in many Commonwealth countries. Our prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's mission statement for a "Skilled India" aims to train our youth to enter national and global labour markets. His slogan of 'skills, scale, speed' resonates well with many governments who are in a hurry to skill their young people and empower them for livelihoods opportunities.

Unemployment is a global challenge, particularly youth unemployment which is 12.6 % globally. What is of concern is that in South Asia 23% people with tertiary qualifications are unemployed. What are the skills required for employability? A recent study interviewed employers in five cities in South Asia: New Delhi, Mumbai, Bhopal; Lahore and Dhaka. Two clear themes emerged from the employer interviews in these three countries. The first is the

importance of skills such as leadership, communication, honesty/ethics, teamwork and flexibility. The second is the importance of being able to learn and the need for critical thinking and analytical skills (Burnett, p. 9).

One of the fundamental problems in our country is the mismatch between education and employment. Are we teaching our students the skills they need for gainful employment? Experts warn that the Indian education system is churning out a workforce without the requisite skills for the new economy.

Linda Gratton in her book *The Shift--The Future of Work is already here* talks about five major forces that will fundamentally change the way we work. The five forces are: *one*, the force of technology; *two*, the force of globalization; *three*, the force of demography and longevity; *four*, the force of society and *five*, the force of energy resources.

How will we face these five forces? According to Gratton we need to make three shifts. The first shift involves making a move from being a shallow generalist to a serial master. What does this mean? Today we cannot succeed by simply being a ‘generalist’ who knows a little bit about this and that. We need to become ‘serial masters’ who have in-depth knowledge and competencies in a number of domains. With so much talent to choose from, what unique skill do we have to stand out? What role does our educational system have in helping us make this shift?

The second shift refers to making a transition from being an ‘isolated competitor’ to an ‘innovative connector’. Instead of working alone we need to work collaboratively with others. This should not be difficult since the majority of the global population of 7 billion are connected in some way or another through technology. Traditionally, success at work was often attributed to personal drive and ambition. Now, it is becoming increasingly clear that we need to have a combination of two skills – expertise in a chosen field and a strong network.

The third shift is from being a voracious consumer to impassioned producer. This includes a transition towards work that is more meaningful, where you can ‘make things’ and become an entrepreneur. It is more about moving away from a nation of job seekers to a nation of enterprising employees and employers. But that requires hard work.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers* gives an interesting recipe for how to become a world class expert in any field of activity—it is the 10,000 hour practice rule. For example, Bill Gates got the opportunity to do computer programming when still in Grade 8. He spent about 20-30 hours on the computer every week during the night and on weekends and he exceeded the 10,000 hour mark in about seven years. As Henry Ford put it ‘Genius is seldom recognized for what it is: a great capacity for hard work.’

I am sure KKHSOU has equipped you with a robust capacity for hard work and discipline. The Commonwealth of Learning has a close collaboration with KKHSOU, and we will continue this partnership as the University adopts new technologies and approaches to reach the last person in the queue. Most recently, KKHSOU has gone through a successful completion of the COL Review and Improvement Assessment which will enhance the ‘culture of quality’ within the institution.

In conclusion, let me extend my warm greetings and congratulations to all of you, my fellow graduates. As you set out on the next steps of your journey, and as you cross many more milestones that mark your achievements, I am sure you will proudly recall the value of the opportunities that KKHSOU gave you, and how it empowered you for success.

Thank you for your kind attention.

References:

Gratton, Lynda (2011). *The Shift: The Future of Work is Already Here*. London. Collins

Burnett, Nicholas (2012), 'Skills for Employability in Africa and Asia'; Results for Development Institute, 2012

Gladwell, Malcolm. (2008). *Outliers*