

# Occasional Address

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*by*

*Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan*

*President, The Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver*

*upon being awarded a*

*Doctor of the University, honoris causa,*

*by Charles Sturt University*

*CSU Graduation Ceremony*

*16 April 1998*

*Bathurst, NSW, Australia*

*Citation, read by the Vice-Chancellor*

*News item: presentation of award*

Your Excellency,  
Vice-Chancellor,  
Members of the Academic Community,  
Graduands, Parents and Friends,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great privilege for me to be here today to receive this wonderful honour from the University and to share with you, the joy of your degree congregation. From the sidelines, I have watched this institution grow since achieving university status some nine years ago. It is wonderful to see its development in research, teaching, off-campus education and extensive offshore presence. The University's leadership and management have rightfully earned our collective admiration and deserve hearty congratulations.

This is indeed a proud day for all those graduating. For many of you, it is the fulfilment of a dream of receiving your first university degree and, for others, it may perhaps be the second or even third such occasion. You must take pride in your achievements; you have successfully taken the challenge of learning further and subjected yourself to rigorous study and examination, through months of sheer tenacity, single-mindedness, ambition, drive, perseverance and hard work. You not only deserve our congratulations, but also our praise and admiration. Graduates, I consider it an honour to be standing here in your midst to celebrate your graduation. I share in your happiness and, like you, I am delighted with the

honour that this University has conferred upon me and, through this accolade, it gives recognition to the work of The Commonwealth of Learning.

Your Excellency, Mr. Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor and friends, like our new graduates of today and throughout the world, but, more particularly, throughout our Commonwealth, thousands of men and women are undergoing training, retraining, learning and reskilling in a variety of disciplines through providers such as the Charles Sturt University. In most countries, young and mature students are undertaking education in the context of a world environment that is uncertain as to where the future and the planet will take them, despite increasing wealth, prosperity, better prior learning, shifting economic activity, globalisation and longer life. Perhaps, the only certainty is the need for all of us to acquire the capacity to return to learning throughout our lives in order to carry on with our lives. By and large, in a country such as yours, for various good reasons, barriers to learning and training have been coming down and that is not a bad thing.

In early 1991, the much-respected British Royal Society of the Arts released a report called Learning Pays. In it, they described the need for creating a learning society and defined such a society as "one in which everyone (in the community) participated in education and training throughout their life. It would be a society characterised by high standards and low failures. In the past, we have too often allowed ourselves to believe that high standards can only be attained at the expense of high rates of failure; or that low levels of failure necessarily entail low standards. In the learning society that would not be the case".

What this implies and becoming clearer in many parts of the world, is that education or the desire to be educated need not, nor does not stop at a particular point in a person's life through the intervention of examinations, graduation ceremonies and awards. Education is lifelong and given the phenomenal expansion of knowledge, technology, political and business alignments, individuals should constantly be learning, retraining and reskilling in order to be better employers, employees, peers, colleagues, parents, siblings and citizens. In a learning society, both individuals and society accept these learning and teaching responsibilities. It is a society in which:

- learning is accepted as a continuing activity throughout life;
- learners take responsibility for their progress;
- assessment confirms progress rather than brands failure;
- capability, personal and shared values and team work are recognised equally with pursuit of knowledge; and
- learning is a partnership between students, parents and teachers, employers and the community, all of whom work together to improve performance.

Should this development take place, and there is every indication that it would, then in all likelihood our institutions of learning must re-engineer themselves to be relevant to education in the 21st century. However, in order to be relevant, our institutions need to have a clear view of their targets, the products that their clients need and a strategy to create and deliver them. For a large number of learners (especially

adult), flexibility and convenience of resource-based learning off-campus will remain the only alternative to continue learning; for governments and employers, the cost-efficiency of delivering training through such education will remain attractive; for colleagues and families, it will remain the most socially acceptable form of support without disruption to personal commitments.

Having said these words of optimism for a role of distance education in the 21st century, it will be misleading if, at the same time, I do not caution providers of open and flexible learning that present arrangements for such purposes will need to change. The students of the 21st century would have more prior learning and training than those we are dealing with today; they will have the skill to use sophisticated courseware; perhaps, have more financial resources or access to it through employers and friends, and their educational and training needs will be different.

Reaching these skilled and educated clients through traditional means of classroom-based lectures, print, audio, video materials and written feedback will be a handicap in terms of slowness, sparseness and interactiveness. The use of newer and highly interactive technology will not only enable access to feedback rapidly between tutor and student but also between student and student. On-line education, through computer networks, will provide opportunities for group learning which is active and interactive.

It is said that just 30 years ago, more than half the workers in the rich countries spent their time making things. Today, less than 20% of them do so because machines do most of the mundane and repetitive work. Information technology is infiltrating every aspect of our lives. Planning, pricing, ordering, paying, designing, engineering, distributing, selling and scheduling are all being processed by the computer. The average technologist is said to become, unless refreshed, obsolete within two years. The same will apply to those who practise teaching, health care, social welfare, childcare, law, accountancy or even crime prevention, and the need to refresh their knowledge and skill on a regular basis will become a continuous obligation. As designers of learning for a learning society, educators will face tremendous challenges and opportunities in addressing the needs of the coming century. The opportunities are limitless, but need not be limited to the public sector only. A relationship with business, industry and other private sector entities is another definite direction. Efforts in the area of continuous professional education need to be enhanced, since occupational relevance of courses is generally attractive to private funding.

Already, such radical initiatives are being experimented with in many parts of the world. These allow for learning contracts between teaching institutions and industry in which the learners receive credits for courses designed jointly by academic institutions and employers, certification for job training, assessment of prior experiential learning and many more options.

To meet the needs of the new learners and the learning environment of the future will require organisations that are innovative. Ways will have to be found to deliver courses at new locations, link networks of training sites, develop certification protocols, develop strategies for course development, provide clearing house functions for course-related information and have systems in place that will allow institutions to respond rapidly and meaningfully to needs, accreditations, credit banks and transfers. Organisations will have to do much more than link students to tutors, tutors and students and students. Innovative institutions may also have to explore new ways to enable their students to continue

with their studies as they move from location to location, be willing to use materials not developed by themselves, but develop courses jointly with others and radically change the methods by which they assess learning outcomes.

Developing an interactive, learner-responsive, lifelong educational provision requires substantial resources. Who will pay for these? In my mind, the three parties which stand to benefit from the learning will have to accept the responsibility of meeting the financial needs of the lifelong learner of the next century. First, either society or government has to accept its share of the financial responsibility, as it stands to derive enormous benefits from a well-educated citizenry. Learning empowers, it creates choices, but without choices we cannot be free. Continuous and lifelong education of the individual is one of the best safeguards of democracy. Governments' support of this safeguard, which also enhances the productivity of the nation, is vital.

The second party which could reasonably be expected to pay for part of the lifelong education cost is the employer. Collectively, employers derive benefits from a better-educated workforce and, therefore, have good economic reasons to support adult learning. Learning organisations are good corporate citizens of the future.

Finally, the party which should be expected to support lifelong learning are the learners. They stand to benefit enormously, immediately and continuously from investments in learning and it would be unacceptable to large parts of society that such beneficiaries do not pay for at least part of the cost.

Your Excellency, Vice-Chancellor and friends, in the exciting millennium that is ahead, all of us in the practise of education have an important and interesting role to play. We have the knowledge to deliver lifelong learning to users at their location of choice; we have the technology to support us in our endeavours; and we even have governments and their leaders urging for more and more education. What remains to complete the cycle is the imagination and will of those in education to bring it all together. I think we can.

To our new graduates today, I have this to say. Learning does not stop with the acquisition of your qualification this morning. It is only the beginning. This graduation has confirmed not only your ability in yourself, but also the validity of the new way of learning that you undertook. As you progress through life and career, you will find a need to return to learning over and over again. When you do return to study, you will find universities like Charles Sturt waiting to serve you. I congratulate your present success and wish you well in your future endeavours.

Thank you.