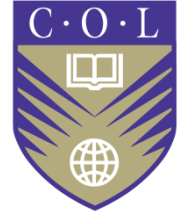


A Passion for Open Universities



*A Passion for Open Universities, NETAJI SUBHAS
OPEN UNIVERSITY, Special Convocation, Kolkata,
India, 14 April 2005*

*Remarks by: Sir John Daniel, President & CEO,
Commonwealth of Learning, following the award of the
degree of Doctor of Letters honoris causa*

Transcript

Honourable Vice-Chancellor, Professor Surabhi Banerjee;
Honourable Chief Guest, Professor V.S.Prasad, Director of the National Assessment and Accreditation
Council;

Distinguished Consul-General of the Federal Republic of Germany, Mr E. Zander;

Members of the University Staff:

Graduates;

Distinguished Guests:

Ladies and Gentlemen.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the privilege of being associated with Netaji Subhas Open University as an honorary Doctor of Letters. I first congratulate the graduates, who have earned their degrees by hard study and examination. Although I have not earned my degree by study and examination I am as proud as you are to receive this award today.

The Vice-Chancellor told you that in 1972, as part of my studies in educational technology, I spent three months as an intern at the UK Open University. The UKOU was then only in its second year of operation but, like NSOU, was growing strongly and already had 40,000 students. I was impressed by everything I saw at that infant Open University. Here, it seemed to me, was the future of higher education. Fresh ideas were being combined with technology to create a new type of university. I gained a lifelong passion for open universities from that experience. That is why I am so delighted to be welcomed into the community of Netaji Subhas Open University today.

Although a combination of fresh ideas and appropriate technology can create a potentially winning

formula for higher education it takes people to implement any formula successfully. I congratulate the Vice-Chancellor and the staff of NSOU for the truly remarkable development of this University in recent years. I refer first to the growth in numbers, from 3,000 students in 2001 to 50,000 today. That growth has given the University the public impact and financial resilience that gives it substantial autonomy to make its own choices about the future directions that it will take.

I refer, second, to the attention to quality that is so evident in the operations of NSOU. Here may I open a parenthesis to say what a wonderful surprise it was to arrive at this Convocation and find that Professor V.S. Prasad was the Chief Guest. We have been friends for many years and Professor Prasad himself has an impressive track record with open universities. Now, as Director of NAAC, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council, he stands for quality in Indian higher education.

NSOU is clearly promoting quality. Yesterday I was privileged to help launch the Bachelor of Education in Special Education. It was evident that great care had been taken to consult the community of practice of special education in designing the course and to learn from the weaknesses of previous attempts to serve them. I note with approval that there are similar links to professions and stakeholders in all the diverse programmes of NSOU.

I also congratulate the Vice-Chancellor and her staff for pursuing a vision of a complete and authentic university that conducts research and generates academic debate and intellectual excitement through an intensive programme of seminars, conferences and special lectures.

You are also using a variety of media such as the EDUSAT satellite, FM radio, interactive radio and videoconferencing, to create interaction between students and staff and to open up the work of NSOU to the general public. There is a diversity of media available today but one great medium, the book, is as important as ever and will remain so far into the future. I was delighted to hear of NSOU's increasing impact at the Kolkata book fair although, having lived in countries with much smaller populations than India's, I have difficulty imagining the 100,000 visitors per day that your stall at the book fair attracted!

The development of NSOU is important to West Bengal, to India and to the wider world. It is most important, however, to the individuals who study with it, whose spirits have been released, and who, through academic achievement, have acquired new confidence in their lives.

Rabindranath Tagore said that 'the object of education is to give man the unity of truth'. That truth is the key to the freedom that flows from education. Yesterday, in my endowment lecture, I quoted that famous son of Kolkata, Amartya Sen, who defines development as freedom. This morning the Vice-Chancellor recalled former Prime Minister Nehru's statement that 'we will liberate the country through education'. The most effective agents of development are free people and education is the road to that freedom.

That is why it is such an honour to become part of the NSOU community. I give you the assurance that the Commonwealth of Learning is eager to accompany you on your journey and to assist in the development of this University in any way that it can.

I congratulate you all. I offer my best wishes to the graduates for their future lives and to Netaji Subhas Open University for its continuing rapid development. The Vice-Chancellor stated that NSOU's ambition is to achieve mega-university status by the 10th plan period. As the person who, some ten years ago, invented the term mega-university to designate a distance-teaching university that enrolls over 100,000 students simultaneously, let me say that nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see NSOU join the select group of mega-universities.

Finally, let me thank you all for being here on the public holiday for the birthday of B.R.Ambedkar. You may know that the Andhra Pradesh Open University is named for Dr. Ambedkar. I also note that our Chief Guest, Professor Prasad, is a former Vice-Chancellor of that University, so we see that life, as it so often does, goes in circles!

Thank you.