

Convocation Address



26 April 2021

COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery Initiative
Virtual Convocation - Asia

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Honourable Tipu Munshi, Commerce Minister, Bangladesh; Honourable Dr Ibrahim Hassan, Minister of Higher Education, Maldives; Prof Kapila Perera, Education Secretary, Sri Lanka; Jeff Maggioncalda, CEO, Coursera; Colleagues, Graduands.

The pandemic continues to rage in Asia, especially in my country India, where it has assumed deadly proportions. My first thoughts are with you Hon Ministers as you continue to provide leadership during this extremely difficult time and with you our learners and your families as you try and stay safe. We hope and pray that the situation improves and is brought under control at the earliest. For us at COL it has been a challenge to provide support for education and training.

The only way to reach our stakeholders has been through technology. And the world has realised the potential of online learning. Millions around the Commonwealth had their first experience of online learning and were surprised to find this quite effective. A recent report from the UK indicates that seven out of ten students were highly satisfied with the quality of the online learning they received. The NEP, India recognises the need to build world class digital infrastructure, educational content and capacity for e-education (p 60). Hon Ministers, during the pandemic, you deployed a range of technologies—print, radio, TV and the internet free of cost. Even so, there has been a huge learning loss that will have to be addressed in a targeted manner once the institutions open.

The covid crisis has also generated a momentum for self-directed learning, laying the foundations for achieving lifelong learning. Interestingly, formal education accounts for about 18.5 % of time up to grade 12 and this keeps decreasing as we transition to post-secondary study. The rest of our waking lives are spent in informal learning environments—the pandemic is providing an opportunity to combine teacher and learner-led approaches to support learning throughout life. This is very important as youth unemployment in Commonwealth Asia before the pandemic was already high at nearly 19% with higher rates for women. This is likely to be further exacerbated by this crisis.

The COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery Program came at the right time to skill and reskill our people for re-employment and livelihoods. Even though connectivity was often a challenge, learners used mobile devices or library facilities in what has been a life-changing experience. COL added value by establishing Help Desks to provide on-site academic and administrative support to learners. This has been especially valuable for first-time online learners, many of them located in very remote areas.

The 10307 learners who are graduating today have earned 51917 certificates, after completing one or more courses. 40% of these graduates are women. This demonstrates how people are eager to learn and succeed if given the opportunity.

The maximum number of certificates in Asia are from Bangladesh, where on an average each learner earned about six certificates. Maldives had some learners and we hope these numbers will increase in the next three years as we continue to offer COL-Coursera and COL-Google courses. Sri Lanka too had the largest number of learners, with women in equal numbers and many of these are from small towns. In Pakistan most of the participants were young women who created their own study group on WhatsApp to support each other. Studies in Asia indicate that because of its flexibility, distance learning is preferred by women. These online courses become an important platform for addressing the issue of gender inequality in the region.

I too am a proud Coursera graduate having completed two very interesting courses. But I must say it took a lot of hard work and discipline to earn the certificates.

Let me congratulate each one of you, dear learners on your well-deserved success. In my view, you who have understood the power of online learning are any employer's dream. Why? Because you have demonstrated that you are motivated, focused, digitally literate and above all lifelong learners. All these are attributes for success to deal with the challenges that lie ahead.

Hon Ministers, you will be pleased to note that because of the huge benefits of this programme, COL will continue this collaboration with Coursera. Hon Ministers, your leadership is critical, and we will need your help to promote this initiative in your country and in the region.

Once again let me thank you Hon Ministers, Jeff Maggioncalda and his team at Coursera, in particular Chad Pasha, our learners and virtual audience that joined us today. I am most grateful to my own team at COL for making this such a special occasion. Let me also acknowledge my colleague Shadrach who has made this a personal mission and helped COL make such a difference to so many.