

Remarks



Remarks by Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan, President and Chief Executive Officer, The Commonwealth of Learning upon being awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters (Hon. D.Lett.) "in recognition of his distinguished service to open and distance education throughout the Commonwealth, and his outstanding contributions to higher education." by Athabasca University, Canada, AU convocation ceremony, Athabasca, Alberta, Canada, 12 June 1999

Transcript

Honourable Chair, Governing Council of Athabasca University,
Mr. President, Elected Officials
Members of the Platform Party,
Graduates, 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 Annual Convocation. From afar, I have watched this University grow and, along the way, record some great achievements while suffering a few minor pains now and then. In the last few years, under a new and dynamic leadership, you have taken on new challenges, crossed further milestones and have become in the process, Canada's premier provider of flexible and open learning. My colleagues from The Commonwealth of Learning as well as peers from other distance teaching universities around the world take pride in your achievements, and we also take pride in the partnership between COL and you to enable your education to go beyond the borders of Alberta. We are pleased that you are making that much needed difference in this country's learning landscape and, despite the agitation and controversies surrounding the use of distance education, you continue to steadfastly pursue your mission and obligations. I am proud and privileged to receive your accolade and honoured to be one of your alumni.

This is indeed a momentous day for all the new graduates. The fulfilment of a dream of receiving a university education and demonstrating that by successfully taking the challenge of examinations, through sheer tenacity, single-mindedness, ambition, drive, perseverance and hard work, deserves not only our congratulations but also our praise and admiration. There are not many people in the world who can do what our new graduates have done, that is, combining work and social and family commitments with

learning. Graduates, it is with great humility that I stand here in your midst to celebrate your graduation. I share in your happiness. No doubt, through your success, you have also enabled Athabasca University to cross yet another important milestone, while reaffirming the purpose of having universities such as Athabasca in our communities. I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate the management and staff of the University for helping you succeed in your learning.

Honourable Chair, Mr. President and friends, like our new graduates of today, throughout the world, but more particularly throughout our Commonwealth, thousands of men and women are undergoing training, retraining, learning and re-skilling in a variety of disciplines through providers such as your University. They are undertaking this education in the context of increasing wealth, prosperity and better education, shifting economic activity and longer life. They are able to do this because, starting with the late sixties, the world has seen the establishment and growth of institutions such as your University in significant numbers. There are many reasons for the growth of open education towards the latter part of this century. Of these, perhaps, four stand out as particularly significant. They are:

- an effort by many governments to clear backlogs of unsatisfied demand for education generally and higher education particularly;
- the need to increase the supply of tertiary places for a younger and larger population which had successfully acquired pre-tertiary education;
- the desire to meet the human resource needs of an expanding public sector employer in newly independent nations; and
- an attempt at deriving greater cost-benefits from investments in education.

However, as we begin to move towards the next millennium, those of us who practice distance education may have to ask ourselves whether we will still continue to be relevant to the populations of the 21st century?

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 failure rates. 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 those low levels of failure necessarily entail low standards. In the learning society that would not be the case".

What this definition implies and is becoming clearer in many parts of the world is that education or the desire to be educated need not or does not stop at a particular point in a person's life through the intervention of examinations, graduation ceremonies and awards. Education is life-long and given the phenomenal expansion of knowledge, technologies, political and business alignments, individuals should constantly be learning, retraining and re-skilling 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 own progress;
- assessment confirms progress rather than brands failure;
- capability, personal and shared values and team work are recognised equally with the 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 could, then in all likelihood distance teaching institutions such as Athabasca University will become even bigger players in education in the 21st century. However, in order to be relevant, these 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 adults, the flexibility and convenience of distance education will remain the only alternative to continue learning; for governments and employers the cost-efficiency of delivering training through distance 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 on a role for distance education in the 21st century, it will be misleading if, at the same time, I do not caution that open universities will need to re-engineer themselves to deliver to a vastly different kind of clientele than their present ones. The students of the 21st century will have a lot more prior learning and training than those we are dealing with today, they will have the skills 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.

To meet the needs of the new learners and the learning environment of the future will require organisations that are innovative. Ways 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 in place systems that will allow institutions to respond rapidly and meaningfully to needs, accreditations, credit banks and transfers. Organisations will have to do more in terms of linking students to tutors, tutors and 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, develop courses jointly with others and radically change the ways in which they assess learning outcomes.

Honourable Chairman, Mr. President and friends, having come into existence during the exciting sixties and seventies, distance education and those who participate in it can look forward to the next century with

hope. The new millennium will not only confirm (despite its many detractors) our position as major providers of adult education but also provide fresh opportunities to explore new ideas, alliances and innovations.

To our new graduates today, I have this to say. Learning does not stop with the acquisition of your qualification this afternoon. Reaching Machu Picchu is only the beginning. This graduation has confirmed not only your ability 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 this University waiting to serve you. I congratulate your present success and wish you well in your future endeavours.

Thank you.