

Higher Education & Employability



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COL's Skills for Work Scholarship Award Ceremony (1st Cohort) Mauritius Higher Education Commission

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Hon Vice Prime Minister, Leela Devi Dookhun-Luchoomun, Dr S Saumtally, Chairman, Prof R Mohee, Commissioner Higher Education Commission, Distinguished Guests, Award Winners

Let me say what a pleasure it is to be back in Mauritius. The pandemic has been a challenging time for everyone but despite the difficulties, you did not falter in your support to the Commonwealth of Learning. It is because of such unflinching commitment of partners that COL was able to keep up the momentum of its work. Thanks to the leadership of the dynamic Vice Prime Minister and her team, we have been able to make meaningful contributions to higher education and skills development in Mauritius.

Covid 19 caused the closure of campuses affecting more than 220 million HE students worldwide. Most institutions had to pivot to emergency remote teaching. Many did not have adequate technology infrastructure. Even in the US and Canada a study revealed that over 50% of teachers required help with supporting remote students, needed access to digital materials and wanted assistance with technology. Students too suffered in various ways--and half of them felt that their performance had declined. Many faced challenges relating to technology tools and connectivity and most felt an impact on their psychological well-being. The vulnerable are most impacted in crisis situations and existing inequalities were further exacerbated. The pandemic has deepened the learning crisis. The recent Educause Horizon report sums up six new trends in higher education: the widening of the digital divide; increased use of hybrid learning; demand for new skills; a focus on sustainable development and a decrease in funding.

This means that we must look for alternative and innovative ways of providing access and equity in higher education. Higher levels of education usually translate into better employment opportunities and higher earnings. Among tertiary-educated adults, the relative earning advantages increase with the level of tertiary education. On average across OECD countries, those with a master's, doctoral or equivalent degree earn twice as much as those with lower qualifications (OECD, 2021)

In addition to individual benefits higher education contributes to higher social returns on investment. A World Bank report shows that the private rate of return on higher education ranges from 12-26%, while social return on investment ranges from 9-13% amongst low-, middle- and high-income countries.

Youth unemployment has risen during the pandemic, and the employability of graduates will be a key factor in national recovery. Last year the unemployment rate in Mauritius was 9.4%, which is lower than the global average. The sectors affected were manufacturing, accommodation, food services and textiles, where women were disadvantaged. How can higher education produce employable graduates who contribute to sustainable development?

In 2021, a Manpower Group survey found that 69 % of employers had trouble finding qualified graduates to hire. A higher education system that responds to market needs and future requirements, must integrate employability pathways by re-imagining policies and practices. COL has developed a framework and tools that can facilitate this process. This is one of the key legacies left by Prof Mohee during her short tenure at COL and is now being adopted in several institutions across Africa.

According to a McKinsey report, the future of work will require foundational skills along four dimensions: cognitive, interpersonal, self-leadership and digital. People with employable skills, will be individuals i) who can add value beyond what can be done by automated systems, (ii) who work efficiently in a digital environment, and (iii) can demonstrate resilience to adapt to new ways of working and new occupations.

Since the future is uncertain, let us ensure that our graduates have three literacies that will prepare them for the future. First, human literacy, prepares students to perform jobs that only human beings can do. Human literacy will help them to make ethical choices, equip them for social engagement through effective communication. Second, data literacy is essential in a world driven by data. Learners must be able to find meaning in the flood of information around us. Third, technological literacy is essential if we are to understand machines and their uses. Learners must be able to deploy software and hardware in order to maximize their powers to achieve and create. If we can equip our learners with these three literacies, we will be preparing them for the jobs that do not yet exist.

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

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.

Congratulations once again. I hope you will continue to learn and acquire additional skills, support each other with empathy and care and contribute to national development.