

# Convocation Address

16 March 2021

COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery Initiative  
Virtual Convocation – The Pacific



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Hon Richard-Hyde Menke, Deputy Minister of Education, Nauru; Jeff Maggioncalda, CEO, Coursera;  
Colleagues, Graduands

Its more than one year since the pandemic and we're still meeting virtually. While this has been a very challenging time, the world has realised the potential of online learning. Millions around the world had their first experience of technology enabled learning and were surprised to find this quite effective. A recent report from the UK indicates that seven out of ten students liked the quality of the online learning they received. Similarly, in China, today more teachers and students accept online learning as a quality option.

The covid crisis has also generated a momentum for self-directed learning, laying the foundations for achieving sustainable lifelong learning. We have learned some hard lessons, but this may lead us to modernise and overhaul our education systems for the 21st century. Governments will need to invest more in technology than in brick and mortar solutions. Hon Minister, during the pandemic, you and your fellow ministers deployed a range of technologies—print, radio, TV, and the internet. While there is an uneven development of technology in the different countries in the Pacific, access to the internet is increasing rapidly.

Even before the pandemic, the education sector in the Pacific was undergoing rapid changes. There was already an emphasis on how ODFL can help address issues of equity by helping marginalised communities learn in new ways. Many learners are dispersed in remote geographical regions with limited access to resources and connectivity. In addition, most of our island states are vulnerable to frequent natural disasters. How can we contribute to building resilient systems prepared for these challenges? Investment in human resource development and the empowerment of our people are the foundation of robust and resilient societies.

The COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery Program came at the right time to skill and reskill our people for re-employment and livelihoods. Since the students could not go to the university, some of the top universities of the world came to the student and that too free of cost! And for this, we must thank Jeff Maggioncalda, and his team members, in particular Chad Pasha, for making this possible for 150,000 Commonwealth citizens across the globe.

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 127 learners who are graduating today have earned 429 certificates, after completing one or more courses. 60% of these graduates are women. This demonstrates how people are eager to learn and succeed if given the opportunity.

Warm congratulations to you the 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. 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.

Hon Minister, you will be pleased to know that because of the huge benefits of this programme, COL will continue this collaboration with Coursera. We hope that the success of those who graduate today will motivate many more to participate in the next round. 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 Minister, Jeff Maggioncalda and his team at Coursera, and our learners and virtual audience that have 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.