

Convocation Address



*Vardhaman Mahaveer Open University
Kota, India
24 August 2012*

*By Professor Asha Kanwar
Commonwealth of Learning*

Your Excellency, Madam Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Graduates, Distinguished Colleagues, Eminent Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a very special honour to be here today at the Convocation of the Vardhaman Mahaveer Open University on the occasion of its silver jubilee. The VMOU was established in 1987, the same year that the Commonwealth Heads of Government met in Vancouver and decided to set up my organization the Commonwealth of Learning or COL. At that time, the Commonwealth Heads were concerned about the lack of opportunities for higher education in many developing countries. Students went abroad, paid huge tuition fees and many times did not return to the home country. Brain drain was a major issue and the Heads decided to use technology to strengthen higher education in the developing world. The purpose of COL was ‘to create and widen access to opportunities for learning, by promoting cooperation between universities, colleges and other educational institutions throughout the Commonwealth, making use of the potential offered by distance education and by the application of communication technologies to education’ (MOU, 1988). The then prime minister of India Shri Rajeev Gandhi warmly supported the idea by pledging financial support and India has been a consistent contributor to the COL budget ever since.

What VMOU and COL share is 25 years of service to open and distance learning—VMOU serving the people of Rajasthan and COL working in the service of the 54 nations of the Commonwealth. I joined the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 1988 and have worked for open and distance education in India, Africa and the wider Commonwealth for nearly 25 years myself. So I am absolutely delighted to receive an honorary doctorate on such an occasion: one which celebrates individual, institutional and pan-Commonwealth contributions to the field of open and distance learning. It is a privilege to be a part of this happy occasion, and I thank the Vice Chancellor, Dr Naresh Dadhich, for giving me this opportunity to be with you today.

The Kota Open University was renamed after the great religious reformer of the sixth century BC, Vardhaman Mahaveer who believed that the class or caste of an individual does not matter—a person becomes great through his or her deeds. Education helps us to realize our full potential. Many people in our remote villages and towns do not have access to quality education. In ‘A study on the development of the state open universities in India’ commissioned by COL in 2007, when asked about its plan for future growth, VMOU responded ‘our plan is to reach the unreached’ (Rajagopalan, p. 27). VMOU has been

providing opportunities to thousands of men and women who are very diverse in terms of age and social background, to gain qualifications ranging from certificates to diplomas, degrees and doctorates through its 80 academic programmes. So if the student cannot reach the institution, the institution is reaching the student in remote rural locations through flexible need-based programmes. As the need for education increases around the world, the role of open and distance learning will become more important than ever before.

India, like many developing countries of the Commonwealth, believes in open and distance learning. Today, Asia has 70 open universities. India alone has 14 open universities and about 150 dual mode universities catering to nearly 24% of those who enter higher education in this country. Research findings show that there is 'no significant difference' between distance and traditional classroom instruction in terms of learning outcomes; yet there is a lingering perception, especially in the developing world, that distance education is not as effective or adequate as formal education. How do we address this gap in understanding and perception? Is it because many still tend to think that distance education is an easier option to secure a university degree compared to the rigors demanded by formal full-time education? It is interesting that the perceptions about the effectiveness of distance education in the developed countries are quite different from those in the developing world. For instance, the Open University of the UK ranked fifth among the 100 universities surveyed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK and was one rank higher than Oxford University (Daniel et al, 2005). Similarly in Canada, there is no distinction made between an open or distance learning qualification. Institutions in the developing world need to do much more to raise the profile of open and distance education.

I myself have been a self-learner for my MA studies. Coming from a conservative family in Himachal Pradesh, I was married soon after I completed my BA degree. I wanted to study further like my friends who were going to elite colleges in Chandigarh and Delhi. I was good at studies and I didn't want to give up just then. So I looked at the English Literature syllabus of Panjab University, bought the books and enjoyed reading every one of them. I was an external or private student who sat in the same exams that the regular students did. To my great surprise, I topped the university in both years and it seemed quite effortless. I was enjoying the reading and reflecting on it. This gave me an original perspective which was probably appreciated by the examiners. So distance education students can be as innovative and creative as anyone coming from campus institutions. This Masters degree opened many doors for me. If it hadn't been for this, I would never have got a scholarship to do my PhD from the University of Sussex. Now would I be standing before you today. Last year, an IAS topper got his Masters degree from IGNOU and said that the structured distance learning materials helped him in succeeding in the IAS exams. So studying at a distance can be a very positive experience and lead to important qualifications and job opportunities. But these days getting a degree is not enough.

Today the world has changed and knowledge is multiplying at a rapid pace. What we learnt two or three decades ago is just not enough even for survival, let alone for success, in a highly competitive global market. Research indicates that you could have two to four careers in a lifetime, something that is already happening in North America. So if you enter the world of work, you will still need to continue to learn, unlearn and re-learn many different things during the course of your life. In short you will need to be lifelong learners if you wish to succeed. You will have to be prepared for making multiple career choices in the ever-changing global economy.

We must also be prepared for the skills that are required to succeed in the 21st century. There are three different types of skills: cognitive; non-cognitive and technical. Cognitive skills relate to analytical and critical thinking, which we are trained in, through academic programmes; non-cognitive skills relate to attitudes like honesty, teamwork and leadership; and technical skills are related to a specific field like construction, IT, tourism etc and are acquired through academic and practical training.

Speaking at a conference in Maastricht in 2009, Sam Pitroda of the National Knowledge Commission said that to succeed in the 21st century, Indian students require certain skills. They must be analytic, innovative, ethical, disciplined and respectful. Most of these are non-cognitive skills. Many countries have identified their own set of 21st century skills. In Thailand, six skills are considered critical: analytical skills, management skills, technical skills, team work, computer skills and foreign language skills. I think we can agree that these skills are all relevant in India as well. English language and IT skills are being stressed across all our states.

There is a great deal of emphasis on skills development in many developing countries. Unemployment is a global challenge. About 45% of the world's young people, many of them girls and women, are without work. What are the skills required for employability? A recent study interviewed employers in five cities in South Asia: New Delhi, Mumbai, Bhopal; Lahore in Pakistan and Dhaka in Bangladesh. Two clear themes emerged from the employer interviews in these three countries. The first is the importance of non-cognitive skills such as leadership, communication, honesty/ethics, teamwork and flexibility. The second is the importance of being able to learn and the need for critical thinking and analytical skills (Burnett, p. 9). This is a very important finding—our educational system has always laid a greater emphasis on cognitive skills. We can see that employers in the twenty first are increasingly stressing the need for non-cognitive skills.

In North America there is an interesting trend as more young women are earning higher salaries compared to young men. Why is this so? The nature of the economy has changed. Earlier it was a manufacturing economy producing goods and because strength mattered, men dominated the work force. Today we have a knowledge economy in which a different set of skills is required for success. According to Hanna Rosin, what is now needed is intelligence, the ability to sit still and focus, to listen carefully, communicate openly and work in teams. Women can do all these things very well and so they are earning higher salaries. (TED Talk). You will note that most of these skills are non-cognitive skills or what we sometimes call 21st century skills.

The challenge before educational institutions today is how to integrate non-cognitive skills into the curriculum. This is possible through the growing availability of various technologies including low-cost mobile devices. VMOU should take a lead in harnessing the potential of these devices to enrich the learning experience of its students. COL will continue its partnership with the VMOU. Most recently, VMOU has gone through a successful completion of the COL Review and Improvement Assessment which will result in a Quality policy for the institution and enhance the culture of quality within the institution.

In conclusion, let me extend my warm greetings and congratulations to all of you who graduate today. As you set out on the next steps of your journey, and as you cross many more milestones that mark your

achievements, I am sure you will proudly recall the value of the opportunities that VMOU gave you, and how it empowered you for success.

Thank you for your kind attention.

References

J Daniel, A Kanwar, Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic, (2005), 'Mega-university=mega quality?' Keynote by Sir John Daniel at 2nd World Summit of Mega-Universities, 25 September, 2005, at <http://www.col.org/colweb/site/pid/3588>

Memorandum of Understanding on the Commonwealth of Learning. As agreed by Commonwealth Governments on 1 September, 1988 and as amended; October 31, 1995.

Nicholas Burnett, (2012), 'Skills for Employability in Africa and Asia'; draft for review; Results for Development Institute, 2012

T. Rajagopalan, (2007), 'A Study of the Development of the State Open Universities in India'. COL: Consultant's report.

Hanna Rosin (2010), 'New Data on the rise of women' TED Talk