

# Convocation Address



**6 August 2022**

24th Convocation Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University  
Hyderabad, India

Professor Asha Kanwar  
President & CEO, Commonwealth of Learning (COL)

The Hon'ble Governor, Telangana;  
Lieutenant Governor, Puducherry and Chancellor of the University;  
Respected Vice-Chancellor;  
Members of the Executive Council;  
Deans, Directors and Heads;  
Registrar;  
Graduands;  
Media Persons;  
Distinguished Guests:

Thank you for the honour which I am proud to accept. This award would not have been possible without the unwavering support I get from the wonderful team at the Commonwealth of Learning and friends from around the Commonwealth. This honour also belongs to them.

It is a privilege to become an alumnus of Dr BRAOU, the oldest open university in the country which became a model for some of the state open universities that followed. Dr BRAOU is a mega university which enrolled over 113000 in 2021, 46% being female. COL has been a partner of this university over the years, with the most recent collaboration being on the development of an OER policy and implementation plan. I have another connection with BRAOU – Prof G Ram Reddy the founding VC of this university was my VC at IGNOU from where he joined COL as its first Vice President. Prof Ram Reddy was a visionary academic leader who developed open and distance learning within India and around the Commonwealth.

As you know, the Commonwealth of Learning, is an intergovernmental organisation established by the Commonwealth Heads of Government, with headquarters in Vancouver and a regional office for Asia in New Delhi. We are very grateful to India for providing regular and consistent support, both financial and intellectual.

A Convocation ceremony is a very important milestone in the life of an institution, and I am delighted to be a part of this happy occasion. I thank the Vice Chancellor, Prof Seetharama Rao and the Executive Council for the invitation. Let me congratulate you dear students on your well-deserved success. In my view, the students who graduate from a distance learning institution, as you have done, are any employer's dream. Instead of studying full time, you have often balanced the requirements of study with your family responsibilities and job requirements. It is because of your motivation, discipline and commitment that you are here today to receive your hard-won

qualifications. Let us not forget the support and sacrifices made by your families, especially during the pandemic.

It is a pleasure to be here in person after the several lockdowns and restrictions that we experienced. Covid 19 caused the biggest disruption of education in human history where over 95% of students worldwide were impacted. The closure of campuses affected more than 220 million higher education students worldwide (UNESCO, 2021). Most institutions had to pivot to emergency remote teaching. Many did not have adequate technology infrastructure. But the 33 open universities in the Commonwealth, including the 17 in India, were able to remain open, catering to over 5 million students annually.

Some of you are already in employment while others will be seeking it. What are the options? 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. There seems to be a disconnect between what we teach and what is required by the job market. And with advances in technology, the future becomes even more uncertain.

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 difficult to predict, let us ensure that our graduates have three literacies. 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.

Governments are looking for ways in which young people can be skilled for employment and entrepreneurship. In order to reach large numbers, policy makers around the developing world have realized that traditional brick and mortar solutions are not enough. One of the silver linings of the pandemic has been the global acceptance of distance and technology enabled learning.

Can distance education contribute to increasing the number of employable graduates? Globally we have seen a steady rise in Gross Enrolment Ratios in tertiary education to 40%. Convinced that higher education leads to higher earnings and social mobility, policy makers have invested in this sector. Both developed and developing countries such as Australia, Chile and UK have very high GER. 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 (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

The GER in India is about 27% where 12 % of all enrolments in higher education are in distance learning programmes with a large participation of women (MHRD, 2020). As the National Education Policy 2020 states increased access, equity, and inclusion in higher education will be achieved through online education and Open and Distance Learning with a national target of 50% GER by 2035 (MHRD, 2020). This target can only be achieved through the active participation of the open distance and online learning ecosystem in the country. It is for this reason that the government plans to initiate a digital university next year.

Youth unemployment has risen during the pandemic, and the employability of graduates will be a key factor in national development. How can open universities produce employable graduates who contribute to sustainable development? But opportunities for livelihoods do not come from employment alone. Instead of simply being job seekers, can we become job creators? Our educational system must breed and nurture entrepreneurs. We live in a world that values and rewards innovators. Do we need to be born innovators or is this a skill that can be acquired? After studying thousands of innovators, Dyer et al (2013) in their book *The Innovator's DNA* have distilled the skills that all innovators share. These are simple skills: questioning, observing, networking and experimenting. What does this mean?

Innovators ask questions all the time. Asking simple questions can often lead to profound discoveries. Steve Jobs wanted to know why computers needed a fan in the first place and the rest is history. Observing closely is a skill that all innovators share—they try to carefully understand how people, technologies and systems work and arrive at insights and lessons that can be helpful in their own situation. In addition, innovators are great networkers—and here we don't just refer to social networking but meeting with people from different backgrounds and disciplines to explore ideas, which can further trigger new ideas. And finally, innovators are always trying out new experiences and solutions. Innovation is a skill that can be mastered, and we need to practise the skills of questioning, observing, networking and experimenting systematically until they become part of our DNA.

You have worked hard, and you richly deserve your success. As someone who also graduated as a distance learner, let me share three things. First, the 21st century is very different from the past century in which people from our generation graduated. In our days it was enough to do a degree and find a job which lasted until you retired. Now, research shows that you will be changing at least two to four jobs during your careers—which means you'll have to continue learning throughout life. Second, many times life is not a simple equation, and hard work does not always lead to success. We must also be prepared for failure. As Edison said, 'I haven't failed...I've just found 10,000 ways that do not work'. Let's stay positive and persevere until we succeed. In fact, there is no substitute for

perseverance. Third, your altitude will depend on your attitude. As you know, intelligence is very important but emotional intelligence is even more valued in today's world. We must develop the skill of empathising with people and understanding their perspective. A positive frame of mind and a can-do approach is what the world of work needs today.

Innovators are also lifelong learners. So, your learning does not end today. You will still need to continue to learn, unlearn and re-learn many different things during the course of your lives. Learning how to learn would be the biggest advantage that you leave with today and this will always stand you in good stead. This is an important skill that Dr BRAOU has given you.

As you graduate today, you are expected to contribute to your family, your community and your country. In addition, you are also global citizens who must contribute to the sustainability and well-being of our planet. Access to decent livelihoods and a life of dignity is fundamental to our future.

Let me congratulate you dear students on your well-deserved success. The world awaits and the future beckons. Each one of us can make a difference. And as Mahatma Gandhi said, 'In a gentle way, you can shake the world'.