

Creating an Endowment for Humanity: The role of Universities, Mega-universities and Hyper-universities



Netaji Subhas Open University, Annual Foundation Day Endowment Lecture 2007

Creating an Endowment for Humanity: the role of Universities, Mega-universities and Hyper-universities

Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning

Introduction

Vice-Chancellor, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to be back at Netaji Subhas Open University once again. I am very proud to be an honorary graduate of this University and to have my name associated with your Green Campus at Kalyani. You gave me the honour of inaugurating that campus and named your Herbal Medicinal Plant Research Centre for me. I feel very closely associated with Netaji Subhas Open University and therefore, quite unwarrantedly, feel some reflected glory as I look at your tremendous accomplishments.

Your first accomplishment is simply growth. People sometimes say that numbers do not mean anything in India, with its population of a billion people, but I disagree. Doing anything at large scale is always a challenge but it is a particular challenge in education.

In 1994, I coined the term mega-university to designate a distance-teaching university that has over 100,000 students. This was in connection with my book *Mega-universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education*.

In that book I made two key points. First, I argued that the demand for higher education was growing so fast that we needed to expand the number and size of the distance-teaching universities, since such institutions have a unique ability to expand without sacrificing quality. Second, I suggested that contemporary technologies, for which I used the term 'knowledge media', are particularly appropriate for enabling distance teaching universities to expand numbers whilst maintaining quality and continuing to cut costs.

Mega-Universities and Hyper-Universities

When I wrote that book there were 11 mega-universities around the world. Now there are about 20 of them and I am delighted to observe that this year Netaji Subhas Open University has joined their number since you now have 100,000 students. This is a tremendous achievement, particularly when I note that at the turn of the century, in 2000, you had less than 5,000 students. What is more, and I shall come back to this in a minute, you have done this whilst reinforcing both the scope and the quality of what you do.

I congratulate your Vice-Chancellor, Professor Surabhi Banerjee and all the staff, students and supporters of NSOU for this stellar achievement, which is one of the great success stories of higher education of the early 21st century.

Let me open a footnote to say that as well as multiplying, the mega-universities continue to grow. I must now coin an additional term, 'hyper-university', to designate distance teaching universities with over one million students. I am aware of three: your Indira Gandhi National Open University; the China Central TV University system, and Turkey's Anadolu University. Yesterday I heard that the Digital University of the Maharashtra Knowledge Corporation Limited has a million learners. I hope that someone will take up the challenge of writing a book about these institutions, which are charting new territory in higher education.

The Achievements of Netaji Subhas Open University

But let me return to NSOU. From my association with your University I have observed that throughout your very rapid growth you have paid close attention to the provision of support services to students and the development of a regional network of over 150 study centres. This does you great credit, for there is little virtue in expanding numbers unless you can give the students a quality experience.

Your good work was recognised last year by the Commonwealth of Learning when it presented you with an International Award for Institutional Excellence. I can assure you that I played no part in the decision on that award, which was made by an independent panel of assessors.

I am particularly pleased to see that you are building in the commitment to quality through your Quality Assurance Cell that reviews all the University's output. Quality, of course, is not just a matter of process, but also an expression of the underlying intellectual and academic strength of your University. In this respect I am delighted to note your series of lectures by distinguished academics and, more generally, the intellectual solar system that you have created by associating with NSOU many eminent intellectuals as planets that circulate around the University's core.

Furthermore, quality cannot be only a short-term concern. I am very pleased to note that you are conducting tracer studies on you alumni. Knowing what your graduates do after studying with NSOU is very important for keeping your programmes current and relevant. I note that many of your graduates go into work in the education system at both school and tertiary levels. This gives society a double benefit: the graduates have good livelihoods and the people benefit from educational institutions with well-trained staff.

Earlier I mentioned the important role that the knowledge media, more familiarly known as ICTs, can play in a mega-university. Here you face a special challenge, because the digital divide runs down the middle of India. On the one hand your country has some of the most sophisticated information technology in the world; on the other, the rural areas are only now beginning to feel the impact of the IT revolution, mostly, for the moment, through cellular telephony.

However, things are moving fast and we at the Commonwealth of Learning are proud of the way that we have been able to make use of the ICT kiosks that are now available in many villages to help the farmers of Tamil Nadu - most of them women - to increase their prosperity and experience the empowerment that comes with greater knowledge. NSOU is also trying to use ICTs to empower rural India and I commend you on this work.

I note that earlier this year you laid the foundation stone for new building at NSOU's Salt Lake Campus, which will be completely IT-enabled and will house the Centre for Vocational Development Courses and Programmes, a Digital Studio and Electronic Media Production Centre with state-of-the-art equipment. This will enable NSOU to make even greater use of the EDUSAT educational satellite, for which you have a receive-only terminal.

This is a continuation of the media richness that has long been a feature of NSOU. On a previous visit I was proud to do an interview on your FM channel, Gyan Vani, that does so much to give air time to public intellectuals and other eminent people. These facilities will also enable you to extend your online teaching. You do a great service to the great Bengali diaspora with your online course in Bangla and to the whole world by your portal for the National Centre for Literature & Fine Arts of Tagore. This will have a rich collection of the entire corpus of Tagore's literary works, his songs, paintings, biographies; information about his family and places associated with him; his correspondence and writings about him. This is a signal service not only to the academic community, but to lovers of literature everywhere.

This is already a good list of commendations of NSOU but let me finish with three more before I turn to other themes.

First, you have adopted a remarkable, unusual and far-sighted policy in giving much prominence to technical and vocational education. For most people the most urgent need to learning is learning associated with improving their livelihoods. Recent reports suggest that India's universities are doing a poor job in preparing people for 21st century labour markets, but that criticism cannot be levelled at NSOU.

You offer many need-based vocational development programmes and self-employment oriented courses which serve contemporary requirements. I note for example, courses in Aquaculture and the Production and Cultivation of Ornamental Fish and Fish Feed run in collaboration with the Government Department of Fisheries, Government of West Bengal. I observe courses in Hospital Management run in collaboration with leading hospitals.

Second, as befits the mission of an **open** university, you are preoccupied with the disadvantaged. I refer here to your diploma course for the Sahayaks / Sahayikas of Shishu Shiksha Kendras of West Bengal, which began this year in collaboration with Paschim Banga Rajya Shishu Shiksha Mission under

the Panchayat and Rural Development Department, Government of West Bengal. I refer to your programmes for physically challenged people, such as your B.Ed. (Special Education) courses with the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), in the areas of Mental Retardation, Hearing Impairment and Visual Impairment. I refer to your Study Centre in the Alipore Central Correctional Home, Kolkata, which enables many prisoners with life sentences to enrol at the University and pursue a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

Third, and finally, you are a University open to your community, your nation and the world. This lack of insularity expresses itself in a huge range of partnerships both within India and overseas. I mention the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation; the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India and the University of South Africa as examples that can stand for all the others.

Vice-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen: you can see from this account that Netaji Subhas Open University has the wind in its sails. It has grown rapidly whilst maintaining quality. It has been true to that wonderful word 'open' in its name by offering its programmes to those for whom universities had previously been closed. It is also opening up the academic way of thinking to the public through special lectures and broadcasts. It is redefining the curriculum of tertiary education to put more emphasis on learning in support livelihoods. These are just some of the reasons that I am proud to be an honorary graduate of Netaji Subhas Open University and to give this endowment lecture.

But this is your annual foundation day endowment lecture, so I must do more than praise you. I have entitled this lecture: *Creating an Endowment for Humanity: the role of Universities, Mega-universities and Hyper-universities*. Begging your indulgence if what follows seems a like a post-modern collage of ideas I want to touch on three rather different topics.

First some comments about India's state open universities, then some thoughts on open educational Resources, and finally some questions about respect and understanding.

India's State Open Universities

I have commended you on the development of the Netaji Subhas Open University but I now want to expand the scope of my comments to the state open universities in general. For some years, as I have observed the Indian higher education scene, I have been struck by the very different ways in which the notion of a state open university has taken root in different states. The National Education Policy of 1986 recommended that all states should create open universities, yet only 13 of the 29 states have done so, although I note that state open universities continue to be created.

Even more dramatic are the variations in the ways that these institutions have developed once created. Some, like NSOU, have really taken off, whilst others are still vegetating with low numbers after many years of existence. My COL colleagues and I have often wondered why there are these great differences and last year we decided to try and find out.

We asked Mr T. Rajagopalan, a journalist and former Education Correspondent of the Hindu newspaper to do a survey of the state open universities for us and to write an essay describing his findings. I am

delighted that Mr Rajagopalan is with us today and I express my warm gratitude to him for undertaking this task, which was far from easy. He quickly found that the differences between the state OUs extended to their propensity to reply to questionnaires and reminders. Some, of which NSOU was a stellar example, responded quickly and fully. Others required repeated reminders from both Delhi and Vancouver before they would respond. It is greatly to Mr. Rajagopalan's credit that by his perseverance he finally got data for all 13 state open universities. His report will shortly be available from COL and on our website.

This is not the place to give a full analysis of his results, but let me give you some highlights. He summarises his conclusions as follows:

"Although the Indian State OUs have managed to register huge enrolment figures over the last two decades, a close look at the scene makes one feel that a lot more is to be done to improve the quality and tone up student services. A few of the state OUs, however, have done well in respect of both courses and social reach by way of equity and access. This has much to do with political and institutional leadership also.

"Almost all state OUs in India claim that they provide a better quality alternative to the programmes and courses offered by the correspondence course institutes run by conventional universities. Here also, a certain amount of divergence is seen between the OUs."

He notes, in particular, that *"YCMOU in Maharashtra and NSOU in West Bengal have registered remarkable progress...while except for the initial euphoria at the time of inauguration, nothing much by way of sustaining programmes seems to be in evidence in the case of a few state OUs."*

In explaining the differences he emphasises the role of state governments. In some cases they have not only failed to be supportive, but have obstructed the state open university with red tape. He notes that open universities are particularly dependent on a favourable political environment because in the open universities, as he puts it:

" Academic leaders are expected to give a thrust to development of the learning system and make it vibrant and exciting."

In this context he notes the vital role of the vice-chancellor and says:

"The V.C. as a leader must be a person of impeccable integrity and imbued with a spirit of total dedication to the cause of open and distance learning. Only then can reasonable progress in the path of development of ODL be made. Much depends on the leadership from above and the Vice Chancellor must be a person owing allegiance to the cause of scholarship and learning, not to any political power. Otherwise, how can one expect the Open University to become "a learning community based on reflective practice"?"

His report also notes that the academic staff of an open university must be more creative than in conventional institutions since:

" In the Open University system, the content creator, editor and media producer play a crucial role in transforming even a drab subject into an exciting one, able to rivet the attention of the learner." This

requires training, which few state open universities provide. Here as so often in the survey, NSOU is a model of good practice.

I suspect that NSOU may also recognise itself in the following extract from Mr Rajagopalan's essay:

"Bright patches emerge in the case of open universities with good leadership at the top and a congenial environment for work. Vice chancellors with vision and belief in long range planning have brought about certain desirable changes. In such institutions, not only vocational and job oriented programmes but region-specific programmes are given prime place..."

What strikes one as very significant is the fact that a band of researchers instinctively follow the leader in making the academic enterprise purposeful. Again, these employees of the open universities do not have any rigid staff roles or administrative or managerial functions. They find joy in doing multiple tasks which ultimately enhance the utility of the course offering."

I could go on but I think you get the message. We asked why some state open universities have done so much better than others and now we have the answer. It is not a surprising answer but in research it is always good to have even unsurprising hypotheses confirmed. The success of the Netaji Subhas Open University is due to a combination of a supportive state government, a dynamic and committed vice-chancellor, an enthusiastic and versatile staff and student who respond actively to the opportunities presented to them.

All this is excellent because, as you know, your task has hardly begun. India's Tenth Plan 2002-07 aimed to have 40% of students in higher education studying at a distance by 2007. That target has not been met. But the Eleventh Plan returns to the charge with the same target by 2012, that is to say seven million students in ODL by that year. That puts NSOU's attainment of mega-university status into perspective. Given your excellent performance I hope that a substantial proportion of those seven million ODL students get the chance to study with NSOU.

If it doesn't sound grandiloquent, let me say that, to pick up my title, NSOU is an endowment for humanity.

Open Educational Resources

I now move to the second piece of my collage and another form of endowment. I want to talk about open educational resources.

You all know that developing good distance learning courses is expensive because it requires intellectual effort by skilled people, preferably working as a team. The secret of cutting costs is not to skimp on the intellectual and pedagogical input to courses but to achieve economies of scale by having each course - or a version of it - reach many students. For this reason the notion of sharing and adapting courses between institutions has been on the distance learning agenda for many years, but with disappointing results in terms of courses actually shared.

There are two reasons for the disappointing level of course sharing. First, even distance learning institutions suffer from the 'not-invented-here syndrome' that makes them reluctant to use material from elsewhere. Second, the adaptation of courses that are not in electronic formats is cumbersome and expensive.

Recent developments have altered this picture dramatically. We all now use search engines to locate material on the Web, which makes us less prone to the 'not-invented-here syndrome'. Second, the availability of materials in electronic formats has made sharing and adaptation easy.

The result is the growing worldwide movement to create open educational resources.

The potential of open educational resources, or OERs, to make quality learning material available at low cost has attracted the support of donors that wish to increase access to education worldwide. I pay a special tribute to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation that has made particularly large and intelligent investments in the creation of OERs. I mention three of Hewlett's projects in particular because they highlight the evolution of OERs in relation to access.

In 2001 the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) caused a stir by making the course notes of its faculty available on the web for all to see. This launched the OER movement with all the prestige of MIT. The material on display is information on course curricula rather than self-learning materials but it is widely consulted as a benchmark by faculty and students around the world, not least here in Asia.

Exactly a year ago the UK Open University took this one stage further with its OpenLearn initiative. This makes self-learning materials, student support and collaboration tools available on the web. OpenLearn receives 60,000 visits a week and is intended to be of more direct value to students than the MIT material. The site also has a LabSpace where people can mix, match and adapt the materials.

If MIT's OpenCourseware shares information and the UKOU's OpenLearn shares learning, the next step is to share teaching - or course development.

This is what COL and 30 country partners are now doing through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which COL is coordinating through my colleague Paul West.

People from many developing small states are already working collaboratively to prepare learning materials on Tourism and Entrepreneurship, Teacher Education, Life Skills and Disaster Management. These international course teams are developing OERs on a Wiki called WikiEducator that COL created last year. The OERS they produce will be adapted appropriately as courses for each country.

So far, so good! In a few years we have progressed from sharing lecture notes to sharing learning materials to sharing course development. That leads me to make a plea to you. Can we not now apply to teaching the spirit of sharing and building on each other's work that we take for granted in research?

If IGNOU and all the state open universities volunteered to make all or part of their learning material available for free use and adaptation we could quickly build up a tremendous resource for academics across the world. This would be another great endowment for humanity.

Respect and Understanding

I now move towards my conclusion by turning to the third piece of my collage, which is respect and understanding.

This time last week I was in Kampala, Uganda at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. The last time that the Heads met, two years ago in Malta, they were concerned by the level of group violence and confrontation in our world. So they set up a Commission on Respect and Understanding and asked your distinguished Bengali scholar and Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, to chair it.

He presented the Commission's report, which is entitled *Civil Paths to Peace*, to the Heads in Kampala last week. I read it on the flights from Entebbe to Ahmedabad and it is an inspiring document. It stresses, as the Queen did in her speech in Kampala, that the surest path to peaceful development is giving people a voice and giving them the opportunity to learn. It emphasises that the Commonwealth way of multi-lateral dialogue and discourse is more likely to stem group violence than military solutions.

As you would expect with Amartya Sen as its chair, the Commission has much to say about identity and the uses and misuses of identity. It rejects the theory of the clash of civilisations, which it considers deeply flawed at a conceptual level and deeply divisive in practice.

The favourite tactic for promoting group violence is to persuade people that their identity is reduced to a single dimension such as being a Muslim, being white or being poor. Having concentrated people's sense of identity in this way, the fomenters of violence then whip up feelings of victimisation in order to generate aggression against those outside their identity group.

The Commission makes the point, on which Amartya Sen has elaborated in several books, that in fact we all have multiple identities. As well as our gender, our religion and our nationality we are spouses, parents, lovers of literature, automobile enthusiasts, alumni of particular educational institutions, and so on. We each have a rich identity and we must not listen to people who want us to concentrate that identity on only one dimension.

It is important that we show respect, not disrespect, to the many dimensions of others' identities, and it is vital that we try to understand others' points of view. That does not mean that we have to agree with their points of view but we have to understand them.

If we want to live in peaceful and harmonious societies we must learn to work together in common causes with others who have different identities and points of view. One key manifestation of this common cause is citizenship. Most of you are citizens of India and your challenge, in the world's largest and wonderfully diverse democracy, is to make common cause with all your fellow citizens for the advancement and development of India.

You are also, most of you, citizens of Kolkata. The Report of the Commission on Respect and Understanding, *Civil Paths to Peace*, has some special praise for you, which I shall quote in full as I end this lecture:

"Kolkata is one of the poorest cities in India - in the world, even. However, it also has a very low crime rate - the lowest crime rate of any Indian city. This applies to the incidence of murder as well as to all other crimes. It also applies to crime against women, the incidence of which is very substantially lower than in any other Indian city.

"Crime is not an easy subject to explain with empirical generalisations, but there are some possible connections. One is that Kolkata has benefited from the fact that it has a long history of being a thoroughly mixed city where neighbourhoods have not been separated on ethnic or religious lines, as has occurred elsewhere. There are also other social influences, such as the huge role of shared cultural activities in the city, which mobilise the residents in co-operative directions.

"The politics of the city may also play a part. The focus of left-leaning politics in Kolkata and West Bengal on deprivation related to class, and more recently gender, has made it harder to exploit religious differences to instigate riots against minorities, as has happened elsewhere - for example against Muslims and Sikhs in Mumbai and Ahmedabad. Cultural and social factors (and sometimes the absence of such factors) as well as features of political economy, are therefore important in understanding violence in the world today; they demand integrated attention as they are rarely separable."

That is the end of my quote from the report of the Commonwealth's Commission on Respect and Understanding - and it brings me to the end of this lecture. It has been a great honour to give this Endowment Day Annual Foundation Day Lecture.

Conclusion

My title was *Creating an Endowment for Humanity: The role of Universities, Mega-universities and Hyper-universities*. I have urged you to create an endowment for humanity in three ways: by continuing your excellent work for the people of West Bengal, India and the wider world; by contributing to the growing corpus of open educational resources; and by contributing, perhaps in a more self-conscious way, to upholding the role of Kolkata and West Bengal as a model of a society based on respect and understanding.