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## CONVOCATION ADDRESS I

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S.W.E. GOONESEKERE

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to take time off from a heavy schedule of responsibilities to be with you this morning at your annual convocation. When the officer who is planning our own convocation, heard that you had decided to honour me with the award of this degree he said : 'But why now, and not posthumously' ? That comment brought back not merely intimations of mortality, but also vivid memories of the late nineteen eighties. That was a time when the Open University was the only university that remained open for academic activities, even as political terror and intimidation stalked our land. To be alive in the war zone that our beautiful country has become is a great privilege. To be honoured in life by colleagues and peers is a special privilege. I thank the Council and the Senate of the Open University for that honour and for awarding me the highest doctorate of this university, and the sentiments expressed in the citation that accompanies this award.

For some of you today is that very special first graduation day. For others, especially those of you who have combined your studies with full time employment, it is a new milestone in career development. This day, for all of you is symbolic of endeavour and achievement. I congratulate all of you warmly and wish you the very best in your future careers.

I joined the Open University eighteen years ago, as the second Professor of Law. However I, like some of my colleagues in the university, were foundation professors, entrusted with the task of teaching our respective disciplines in a new environment conducive to distance learning. We had

Convocation Address. *OUSL Journal*. Vol. 3. 2001  
Goonesekera

all come from Sri Lankan universities that were familiar with a long tradition of student violence and adversarial conflict between staff and students. The challenge of the conventional university was to communicate and teach when interpersonal relations between staff and students had broken down. Our challenge as Open University professors was to communicate and communicate effectively with the faceless mass of distance learner students.

The Board of Studies of Humanities and Social Sciences as the Faculty was called then, did not have a single computer. We considered ourselves extremely advanced in technology when we could prepare our manuscripts on an electric typewriter. Professors at that time were lesson writers, translators, copy editors and proof readers. When we detected that last typographical error, as we scrutinized a manuscript for that last time, we had to find instant solutions. We would type the correct word, and paste the corrected cut out carefully on the typed page. And so we produced manuscript after manuscript in a range of subjects, hot off the press for the often faceless mass of students, who in turn accepted our inadequacies with tolerance, friendship and understanding.

Professors at that time, had more than multiple roles. The gender bias was clearly in favour of mid career, if not young, women professors. The landscaping on the other side of the canal at the Open University campus owes much to the first Professor of Botany, Professor Joyce Paulraj. Professor Nalini Ratnasiri's calm efficiency, and meticulous attention to detail in processing the first set of bachelor's degree results with minimum facilities set a tradition of accuracy in processing examination results that had an important impact on the examination system of this university.

The Open University as I recall at that time had no declared visions and missions. And yet, as young mid career foundation professors and Deans, we evolved our visions and missions to achieve excellence in tertiary

Convocation Address. *OUSL Journal*. Vol. 3. 2001  
Goonesekera

education through the new education technologies of distance learning. My early colleagues in the Open University - the late Professor Thurairaja, Professor Ratnasiri, Professor Sriyananda, Professor Elsie Kotelawala and the Vice-Chancellor Professor Wijesekera, created an intellectual and professional environment in which we brainstormed collectively, disagreed passionately, and arrived at consensus on the goals, objectives and strategies that were necessary to achieve quality tertiary education through distance learning. We were committed to ensuring that the Open University graduates achieved the academic and professional standards of excellence associated with the best that we had known in the conventional system. I believe that this commitment to the value of academic excellence and striving for that standard has fertilized the academic environment of the Open University. It has been further strengthened by the contribution of younger colleagues. This ethos must remain a cherished part of the Open University's heritage.

The sense of community and team effort that was evolved in those early years and which I know remains a part of the Open University tradition was one of the most satisfying dimensions of work in this university. Service delivery to students and course production in distance learning calls for close interaction between academic staff and administration. The OUSL is therefore fortunate in not being suffocated by the current malaise of a sharp division between academics and university administrators which impacts so negatively on good management in the conventional university system. I recall those early Open University mid level administrators whose contribution was so critical to ensuring that teaching materials were produced in time, evaluation and assignments collected and returned, and day schools held on schedule. The bonds of personal friendship and regard that this interaction forged have remained with me for a life time. It has been a source of satisfaction to see one of the copy editors who I worked

Convocation Address. *OUSL Journal*. Vol. 3. 2001  
Goonesekera

with as Professor of Law, take a OUSL degree, qualify as a lawyer, join the academic staff, and become a good researcher in a similar field of specialization. I remember how his incisive comments on our law manuscripts enlightened me, as a teacher, in the importance of communicating well in course materials, and also stimulated his own interest to be a law student. This sense of community that the distance learning methodology creates between academics and administrators and the ethos of effective service delivery to students is a dimension that should fertilize the conventional university system today. It has wider significance, in a country that is torn apart by conflict, and must find strategies for peaceful conflict resolution. Indeed the most difficult times at the Open University for me were those brief moments when there was a loss of a sense of community because of our incapacity to disagree, to respect, and understand each other.

Distance learning as I know it at the Open University has also introduced a new dimension of enabling close co-operation between academics within a university and a pool of rich resources from outside. The visiting lecturer system sometimes gives Deans and Heads of Departments early cholesterol and panic attacks. However there are also many happy experiences where the university draws on a pool of committed outside academics and professionals who contribute the very best to OUSL programmes. The curricula of the LLB degree programme was initially developed with the assistance of some of the best legal minds in the profession at that time. I recall Justice A.R.B. Amerasinghe, impeccable in a suit and tie, pouring over syllabuses in a fanless room piled with unopened boxes of books which happened to be the Faculty Board Room of that day. Conventional universities are being called upon to interact with industry, bringing in the private sector and other partners. The Open University has I believe already built that tradition into its distance learning educational methodologies and action plans. What is not easy to achieve in this regard

Convocation Address. *OUSL Journal*. Vol. 3. 2001  
Goonesekera

in the conventional university system is a natural dimension of interactive course production methods in the OUSL.

The Open University, has in a short time, evolved into an important institution committed to tertiary education through distance learning, but always linked to an intellectual tradition of academic excellence in teaching and learning. I believe that it must always remain committed to this dimension if it is to resist pressures to create a knowledge based society with a single focus on massification of education. International donor agencies in particular, responding to the demands of globalization, are focussing more and more on information dissemination and technology, sometimes losing sight of the abiding values in university education. We as academics know that learning is a path to knowledge, but knowledge must be a path to wisdom, or 'pragna', as the ancients called it. Education policy in this country has achieved equity of access at the cost of quality, so that democratisation of education has sadly and often resulted in the distribution of poverty, and the spread of learning without knowledge or wisdom. The violence and intolerance that we see today is a dimension of the negative aspects of our educational policy. Recognition of that reality must help us to resist an over focus on the knowledge based society and the massification of education. A country needs technological advances and we must prioritise ICT - Information and Communication Technology. But let us also recognize the generally abysmal status of social science and humanities education in Sri Lanka, and strive to bring back into mainstream academia and public life, great thinkers, philosophers and social analysts produced by our national universities.

Convocation Address. *OUSL Journal*. Vol. 3. 2001  
Goonesekera

The tragic catastrophe that occurred in two great cities of the eastern seaboard of the United States of America reminds us that man's capacity to master the greatest scientific technologies, and create new vistas, can be reduced to ashes by the incapacity to resolve human conflict and bitterness with negotiating skills and human qualities of generosity and tolerance. These events are a poignant statement on the need to balance our knowledge of science and technology with the study of the great disciplines of history, political science, philosophy and religion, and recognize the importance of peace studies and conflict resolution within our universities and seats of learning. The Open University with its integration of electronic media into course production is specially well equipped to move into this area of education.

We must recognize that the monolingual policy in teaching and learning in humanities and social sciences must be discarded for a bilingual policy that will help to spread knowledge and wisdom through learning. I believe that the policy of bilingual teaching in OUSL courses in law, the introduction of a BA course in Social Sciences in English, and the significant contribution of the OUSL in Language Studies are important educational developments, which have been reinforced by recent reforms in secondary and tertiary education. These are important endeavours, which we must guard and cherish and must not permit to be jeopardised by agendas of political correctness. We must recognise the contradiction of giving priority to ICT and the knowledge based society, and continuing an exclusively Sinhala or Tamil medium humanities and social science stream in our schools and universities. If 75% of the internet is in English how do we expect our students to access knowledge on the web, unless we also focus on bilingualism as a medium of instruction? Access to knowledge in English must remain the corner stone of a sound educational policy, and we must combine that with an emphasis on reference and reading as an essential

Convocation Address. *OUSL Journal*. Vol. 3. 2001  
Goonsekera

dimension of secondary and tertiary education in humanities and social sciences.

I hope that new technologies of transformation of knowledge through course materials for the distance learner at the OUSL will not lead to the replacement of high quality teaching texts. Guiding the distance learner through information transformed in an accessible IT idiom can never be a substitute for providing him or her with a range of intellectually stimulating teaching texts, written by experts in the field. I venture to also suggest that accessing documents 'on line' can never be a substitute for the old fashioned pleasure of thumbing through the pages of a good book. This experience has been denied to generations of Sri Lankan students because of mistaken educational policies of the past. The Open University has made a singular contribution by producing good quality teaching texts in law, humanities and social sciences, which are used by students in the conventional universities. I hope that new avenues of funding support will be used to continue to produce this important literature for students, so that a sound tradition of scholarship can be sustained and developed further as a critical dimension of distance learning.

My happiest memories of the OUSL are of vibrant intellectually invigorating Senate and Faculty meetings where serious educational issues were discussed seriously with courage and vision. May that ethos of intellectual liveliness remain a part of the OUSL tradition, in teaching and learning, and one that can fertilize the whole education system of the country today.

Conventional universities have often received the better students, while the Open University has achieved high standards in the quality of its programmes. The challenge for the future will be to attract good students in the younger age group, for a range of courses. The Open University was

Convocation Address. *OUSL Journal*. Vol. 3. 2001  
Goonesekera

established as an institution that would offer courses for adult employed students seeking tertiary education through late entry and a second chance. Yet a large percentage of school leavers have always applied for courses in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. This in my view is a positive development, and must be recognised as such. Conventional universities today require, daily attendance at classes, even as students are increasingly inclined to combine study and employment. Students in conventional universities like, those of the University of Colombo have for some time now combined work with study. They are not full time students, and when they are, they follow a range of courses in different institutions, which also admit a very restricted number of students. Consequently a single student blocks places in several much sought-after study programmes, particularly in law, business and accounting. He or she gets admission as one of only 200 students in the Law Faculty, obtains one of the very few seats at Law College, and also follows accountancy courses. This is a wasteful and inefficient system, and contributes further to severely limiting access to tertiary education.

We should confront this reality by recognising dual mode teaching and learning that encourages distance education methods being integrated into conventional universities. That transformation may however take decades. This presents an opportunity for the OUSL to attract a larger numbers of bright school leavers through new interdisciplinary distance learning courses in humanities and social sciences that are aggressively marketed.

The Open University's experience of a public/private mix in tertiary education has been something of a closely guarded secret. However it is a model that affords important insights as we struggle with the realities of globalization and our long commitment to providing equity of access in education. The International financial institutions have rightly pointed out

Convocation Address. *OUSL Journal*. Vol. 3. 2001  
Goonesekera



that we have failed to cost our education system, and ignored the reality of the large number of students who are denied an opportunity for higher education. It is in this environment that the 'privatization' agenda has become such a controversial issue. The compromise now suggested is that the government will facilitate access to private tertiary education institutions, without introducing reforms in the structure and financing of the national universities.

If the positive dimensions of the new education reforms are to be realised efficiently, in this last chance to change the system, national universities must evolve as self financing institutions, perhaps linking with the OUSL in developing their own distance education programmes.

The fear of privatization can also be addressed if we recognise that national universities can continue to provide equity of access to students, and yet become financially strong and efficient. This has happened in many countries in East Asia, which have achieved high human development indicators. This will require repeal of the strict financial constraints placed by regulations that accompany allocation of state resources from the Consolidated Fund. National universities have declined over the years due to many factors, but the financial controls are a major part of their inefficient management. Universities are capable of introducing internal controls that will provide for accountability. We can achieve the balance between financial autonomy and accountability and improve the delivery of our services to students, if we replicate the OUSL public/private mix in the conventional universities.

Many countries in Asia that have transformed their economies with an intensive privatization programme have discarded the idea of regulation altogether. The catch word now is 'facilitation' rather than 'regulation'.

Convocation Address. *OUSL Journal*. Vol. 3. 2001  
Goonsekera

Yet the breakdown of norms of conduct and ethics, and indeed law and order that we have witnessed in Sri Lanka in recent years suggests that we must continue to regulate some aspects and set norms and standards in tertiary education. Codes of Ethics for academics, and accreditation and evaluation systems are urgently needed today. The challenge is to retain our commitment to recognising access to education as a socio economic right of citizenship, and yet create a tertiary education environment that provides greater opportunities for quality education. We may not wish to privatize our institution and allow free market forces to operate and entrust ourselves to self regulation. However we can and must review our university structures and systems of governance so as to create a balance between autonomy and accountability within the university community. This is critical if national universities are not to wither away in the new environment of economic transformation. National universities can contribute to human resource development only if they can survive and meet the new challenges. A new environment of deregulation combined with the setting and implementation of codes of ethics, and norms on evaluation, will help all of us including the OUSL to attract better students and make a greater contribution to human resource development.

The late Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaiake, in his speech at the opening of Sri Lanka's first parliament in 1948 said that "no people can live on memories alone. It is equally true that history often provides a source of strength and inspiration to guide them in the future. It is only against the background of the past that the present and future can be viewed in correct perspective". It seems to me that we as a nation have lost our sense of direction because we have no collective institutional memory, and no sense of history. Indeed we have not even taught history as a key subject in humanities and social sciences to generations that have passed through our schools and universities. We have seen a break down of our institutions, endemic intolerance and violence, and a profound sense of

Convocation Address. *OUSL Journal*. Vol. 3. 2001  
Goonesekera

alienation even in the academic community in regard to matters that should concern it. It is so easy to destroy institutions and so difficult to create them. It is often institutional memory that can help us to keep a sense of connectedness to abiding values and standards in education, governance or even daily living. Massification of education through distance learning in OUSL may be the new scenario. However, that massification will be a positive development if the OUSL remains committed to its tradition of promoting creative thought, vigorous debate and interactive learning.

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, colleagues and friends, I have spent many of my most intellectually and professionally satisfying years at this university. I have memories of close and valued friendships strengthened by shared values. I have seen the university grow from that little place by the Narahenpita canal to an institution that can soon become, with its 50 million dollars well spent, the seat of excellent distance learning in Asia. I hope that the Open University will remember and reflect on its past, and current experience, and grow and develop with a continuing commitment to achieving academic and professional excellence within a lively vibrant intellectual tradition.

Convocation Address. *OUSL Journal*. Vol. 3. 2001  
Goonesekera