

Convocation Address - II

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*(Deputy Director/United Nations Relief and Works Agency-
Convocation Address on 19 November 2008)*

Opening up the Open Universities

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the privilege of being conferred an honorary Doctor of Letters by the Open University of Sri Lanka. I consider this as a great honor which I will always cherish. I first congratulate all the graduates, who have earned their degrees by hard study and examination. Although I have not earned my degree by study and examination in any course I am equally proud as you are to receive this award today from one of the older open universities in the world and the second oldest in South Asia.

I express my great happiness on this occasion for the strong link I have developed with the Open University and Sri Lanka during the last more than 15 years. I had the opportunity to be involved in several workshops and conferences here including the 25th anniversary celebrations of the University a couple of years ago. I very fondly remember the partnerships and associations I have developed with several institutions and professionals and academics here during my tenure in the Commonwealth of Learning. Now I have moved to probably one of the most difficult educational environments in the entire world- educating the Palestine refugees jointly run by UNESCO and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). My experience in working with some of the successful open universities/schools in the world should give me lot of confidence in dealing with the issue reaching out successfully to over half a million Palestine learners.

Open University model

The open university concept and model is probably one of the most significant innovations in higher education in the last century which threw open the 'ivory towers' of higher education to the masses in both developed and developing countries. It surely helped to increase the opportunities for higher learning considerably. Since the establishment of The Open University, UK in 1969, several open universities came up

all over the world broadly following the UK model, contributing mainly in increasing access in higher education in a cost-effective manner. Initially when the OU, UK was being established many were apprehensive of its success and thought that this would bring down the quality of higher learning. Quality was then perceived as rigid system requirements related to learner profile, curriculum structure, courses choices, attendance in campus face to face sessions and study time and duration. Openness was considered diluting these rigid requirements. Many thought that such flexibilities will bring down quality of higher education. Nothing of that sort happened. That myth is already broken. In a recent evaluation of the Universities in UK the Open University was ranked among the top few higher than some of the so called prestigious Universities. Some Open Universities in the developing countries have also achieved such quality while reaching out to larger number of students.

Adopting 'Open University' model was an historical necessity at that time when higher education was reaching only an elite group of people. It adopted the available distance education techniques and technologies of the time to provide flexible education to large numbers. But, after almost 40 years of its origin should we consider the model still relevant. This could be debated. Many still will vouch for its use even today, may be rightly so. But, some of the open universities are becoming 'ivory tower' of a new type. Although years back they were the innovators, some of practices adopted by these open universities are becoming obsolete today requiring drastic changes. While the philosophy of openness is still very relevant even today, the course development and delivery models might be too outdated to cater to today's needs. Now it is time to think of more cost-efficient and student friendly models which can cater to the changing education and development needs as well as exploiting fully the technology scenario. Let us examine the development needs and the expectation the society has from education.

Education in developing countries

In spite all efforts made in the area of Universalising Primary Education and eradicating literacy and increasing opportunities for higher education many developing countries especially in Sub Saharan Africa and South Asia are lagging behind in all these indicators. Sri Lanka is unique in the South Asian context as it has the highest school enrolment and literacy compared to all its neighbors. It also shows very positive indicators in life expectancy, gender ratio and health. However Sri Lanka has been lagging behind in tertiary

education especially in the areas of technical and professional education. The higher education participation is only around 5% which is lower than many other developing countries.

The role and contribution of the OUSL has to be acknowledged in increasing higher education participation in the country especially in technical and professional areas. It is also welcome to note that Sri Lanka has established an Open School which could reduce the drop outs and failures in the secondary schooling and also allow adults who dropped out in their schooling years to get back to the system and complete schooling. Open and Distance Education in Sri Lanka is getting a face lift. The ADB supported Distance Education Modernisation Project (DEMP) is expected to improve the technology support and networking in the country. May this is the right time for OUSL to have review of its own system and courses and renew itself according to the changing development and technology scenario.

Changing Development and Technology scenario

Expectations from education sector especially higher education have increased due to three major developments during the present decade. Let us examine this one by one.

1. The UN declaration of the Millennium Development Goals which has substantially changed our perspective of the role of human resources in attaining development goals.
2. Launch of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development in 2005 also has created great expectations from education of all types in education and training of a variety of personnel through out life.
3. New developments in ICT is opening up novel and innovative possibilities of networked learning more or less changing the whole paradigm of education in the formal sense.

Let us examine these three developments a little more intensively.

Millennium Development Goals

We are all aware that in September 2000, 147 heads of State and Government, and 189 nations in total, unanimously adopted the

Millennium Declaration endorsing the International Development Goals known since then as the Millennium Development Goals. The Declaration calls for national development, and policies and programmes for attaining eight goals which cut across various sectors. Of the eight MDGs, there are two specific goals concerned about education development itself by focusing on universal primary education (Goals 2) and girls education. Other MDGs are although concerned about other development sectors also indirectly put critical demands on education and training of community, unskilled and skilled workers, technicians and professionals. This has surely increased the expectations from formal and non-formal sectors of education and training.

Education for Sustainable Development

One of the objectives of UNESCO's Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is to provide space and opportunity for refining and promoting the vision of sustainable development through all forms of learning. This means that education towards SD involves everyone at every stage of life as well as in all occupations and all walks of life. It is argued that Sustainable Development can therefore take place only within a perspective of lifelong learning, engaging all possible spaces of learning formal, non-formal and informal, from early childhood to adult life. This learning does not necessarily take place in educational institutions but also in non-formal settings, within community-based organisations and local civil society, the workplace and so on.

Development of Information and Communication Technology

Last decade saw fast and unprecedented development in ICT in various aspects. There are variations in the extent to which different countries have integrated ICT in various education programmes. Broadly this development has happened in the following aspects.

- Many countries have formulated policy frameworks to regulate the development and use of ICT for educational purposes
- ICT infrastructure and connectivity in most countries are growing in a fast pace
- Capacity enhancement and training at different levels is also happening but probably at a slower rate than required

- New pedagogical designs to suit the and support ICT based learning is also being developed
- Community and other stakeholders are becoming more and more aware of the possibilities in the use of ICT in education and training.
- Increased collaboration and networking across sectors is also taking place.

I have no intention neither there is time here to go into all aspects of ICT development during the decade. It is evident that most countries are going through a technological transformation which is changing the context and infrastructure available for education to increase access and enhance quality.

Impact on Open Universities and other ODL institutions

Let us examine how the three developments described earlier namely-MDGs, Education for Sustainable Development and Development in ICT applications in education are impacting all aspects of education provision and their delivery of educational institutions especially open universities and ODL institutions in higher education. The first two developments have put lot of pressure on these institutions in terms of not only the variety of courses expected to be offered to cater to the demand and needs existing in the society to support human resource development in various sectors of development. The learners or clientele needing education and training are not just from the age group of 17-23. Every body at all age group would need education and training related to ones area of work and occupation in different sectors. And also they require it at their convenience and according to their needs. How can the open universities cater to this demand? So, now it is time to open up the Open Universities from their own ivory towers which they have built in the last forty years. The principles which lead to the establishment of the first open university are still very relevant - openness and flexibility in entry qualifications, time and duration of study, course combinations and learning system, etc. We need these and more flexibilities today if we have to be support large education and training needs of very large number of personnel of all age groups without leaving their place of work.

The third development- ICT application in education- can facilitate the Open Universities to effectively and adequately cater to the demand put on them by the education and training needs linked with development. Today even the formal universities have started using ICT in its study system to provide flexibilities of learning. While formal universities are adopting some principles of openness, the Open Universities have to become more open so that both study and assessment can be done in an effective and flexible manner for a larger number of learners of all age groups.

Need for structural transformation and change of mind set

The OUs today require a structural review and introspection. There are very relevant questions to be asked:

- Are we able to cater to the variety of needs of all types of learners of different age groups?
- Are the educational and training needs created by the demand by MDGs and Sustainable Development properly addressed?
- Have we integrated all available technology adequately to support the learning and learner requirements?
- Are the open universities open enough to support all learners and learning needs?

There could be more such questions to be seriously considered. I am confident that if we shed our existing rigidities, be much more flexible and integrate the ICT for various purposes we could become more responsive to the needs by providing the following:

- Individualised learner centred learning to masses
- Very flexible curricular inputs suiting requirements of each and every learner
- Custom made learning designs and arrangements to suit each learner
- On-demand examination as and when required
- Facility for both vertical and horizontal communication and interaction allowing collaborative learning

- Variety of course modules required by clientele for different development needs

Conclusion

Let me again congratulate all who have been awarded degrees today. A few ideas presented here for transforming the universities, especially open universities would be of relevance to many of you too. You will have more educational and training needs while you are at work. You would like to enroll in courses which will help you in your work in future. Open Universities should always be able to satisfy your needs.

I thank all of you and wish you all success.