

Convocation Address



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**Bangladesh Open University
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Your Excellency, Honourable President, People's Republic of Bangladesh, Honourable Education Minister, Honourable Ministers, Chairman, UGC, Honourable VC, PVC, Treasurer, Members, Board of Governors, Academic Council, Bangladesh Open University, Distinguished Guests, Graduates

It is an honour to speak at the fifth Convocation of the Bangladesh Open University (BOU), a pioneer of distance learning in Asia. 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, Dr M. A Mannan and his team 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 sitting here today to receive your hard-won qualifications. Let us not forget the support and sacrifices made by your families.

Some of you are already in employment while others will be seeking it. What are the options? A McKinsey report points out that 'employers, education providers and youth live in parallel universes' and very often these worlds do not meet (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012). Over 50% of the youth surveyed did not believe that their secondary education would lead to employment. Similarly about 50% of the employers did not think that the new graduates had the skills to be hired even at the entry level. There seems to be a disconnect between what we teach and what is required by the job market.

Governments are looking for ways in which young people can be skilled for employment and entrepreneurship. Thirty percent of the population in Bangladesh is young—between the ages of 10 to 24 --and the unemployment rate for young people here is over 10 % (McGinn et al., 2015). Education, especially tertiary education, is seen as a way out of this situation. Tertiary enrolment has tripled in Bangladesh since 2000 and yet the GER in 2014 was only 13.44 % (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016).

As per the World Bank, for any country to achieve sustainable development, the GER in higher education should be in the region of 40-50%. According to the British Council, Bangladesh, as an emerging economy, has the greatest forecast for growth in tertiary education in the next decade.

As governments and policy makers around the developing world sought to expand access to education, reduce costs and improve standards, they realized that traditional brick and mortar solutions would not be enough. They adopted open and distance learning and technologies.

My organization, the Commonwealth of Learning was established by Commonwealth Heads of Government to promote the use of distance and technology enabled learning to enhance access to quality education and training. Bangladesh is an active member of the Commonwealth and has been consistent in its contributions to COL. Bangladesh Open University has been a long-time partner and was one of the founding institutions to develop a joint Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme along with institutions in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This programme is now offered in 11 countries.

Last year the international community adopted seventeen sustainable development goals. Goal 4 focuses on education. One key target is to focus on developing skills for employment and entrepreneurship.

How can we skill our youth at scale? The Skills Vision report 2016, shows that in Bangladesh ‘75% of all government institutions are offering flexible learning options through a second shift of training each day’ (International Labour Organisation, 2016). These efforts can be further supplemented by offering distance learning and technology enhanced approaches.

What kinds of technology? In Bangladesh, while the number of internet users is about 32 %, the real growth has been in mobile devices, with 73% of the population having mobile subscriptions (Internet World Stats, 2016; Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, 2016). Many developing countries are leapfrogging straight into mobile learning rather than computer-based e-learning. In fact a recent report indicates that Asia has several mobile-only countries, of which Bangladesh is one (Ambient Insight Research, 2016). Let us harness technologies that are appropriate, accessible and available to skill our youth.

But is it enough to provide skills? The youth need not just the skills but also the opportunities that their societies provide. Governments have a major role in developing not just sound educational policies but also enabling policies in trade, industry and agriculture (Stiglitz & Greenwald, 2014).

And as we know, opportunities for livelihoods do not come from employment alone. Instead of simply being job seekers, how 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 questioning, observing, networking and experimenting. What does this mean?

Innovators ask questions all the time. Asking simple questions can often lead to profound discoveries. 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—they meet 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 practice the skills of questioning, observing, networking and experimenting systematically until they become part of our DNA.

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.

On that note, let me wish you every success as you enter the next phase of your lives. May this Christmas and New Year bring you peace, prosperity and progress.

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