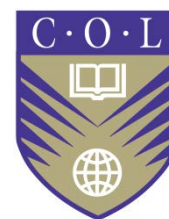


Acceptance Speech

upon receiving an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters



24 November 2016

Wawasan Open University
Penang, Malaysia

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

Salutations

- Yang Amat Berbahagia Tun Mohamed Dzaiddin Abdullah, Chancellor of Wawasan Open University,
- Yang Berbahagia Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, Pro-Chancellor and Chairman, Wawasan Education Foundation;
- Yang Berbahagia Dato' Seri Stephen Yeap, Chairman, Wawasan Open University Sdn. Bhd.;
- Yang Berbahagia Tan Sri Emeritus Prof. Gajaraj Dhanarajan, Chairman of the Board of Governors of Wawasan Open University,
- Yang Berbahagia Prof Dato Dr Ho Sinn Chye, Vice-Chancellor and CEO, Wawasan Open University,
- Distinguished guests, graduands, parents, ladies and gentlemen.

On behalf of my co-recipient of this year's Honorary Doctorate Tan Sri Jemilah Mahmood and myself, I would like to record our acceptance and thanks for this honour accorded to us by the Wawasan Open University. We are both particularly honoured that WOU is recognising women's achievements in our fields of endeavour.

In a short span of a decade, Wawasan Open University has established itself as a leading distance learning provider not just in Malaysia but indeed in all of Asia. It has built this reputation on its values of openness, fairness and respect for diversity and difference. These values resonate strongly with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). COL has shared a very productive relationship with Wawasan Open University since its very inception, not least because your first Vice Chancellor Tan Sri Raj Dhanarajan was also our former President and CEO. Wawasan has always been such a warm and hospitable partner that most of our colleagues keep returning at the first possible opportunity! I must admit that I share their sentiments. So returning here for this honour is both a privilege and a pleasure.

As a close partner, COL has supported several capacity building activities over the years. Wawasan offers the Commonwealth Executive MBA/MPA programme as a member of a 10-country consortium and some of you are graduating today. Open and distance learning has thrown open the ivory towers of higher education around the world. Asia has the largest number of open universities in the world with 41 universities that are known specifically as 'open' universities. If we are to count the number of institutions offering ODL in various forms such as virtual universities, RTVUs, dual mode universities,

we will well exceed a thousand institutions. Over ten million students have benefited from the ten mega universities alone.

In my view, the students who graduate from a distance learning institution, as you are doing today, are any employer's dream. Instead of studying full-time in a campus university, you have often balanced the requirements of study with your family responsibilities and job requirements. You are multi-taskers who can do several things efficiently. 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 to make this possible.

The phenomenal growth of online learning, Open Education Resources (OER) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are disrupting Open and Distance Learning (ODL), as never before. Instead of playing a leadership role, most ODL institutions, with a few exceptions, have watched these developments from a safe distance. Wawasan has been at the forefront of OER developments and has also been a pioneer in offering MOOCs. It has the wawasan or vision to recognise that it is not enough to rest on past laurels but to keep evolving and growing to remain relevant to the needs of our changing times.

What is the future of ODL? One, distance education is no longer the prerogative of ODL institutions as more campus-based institutions offer online learning and MOOCs. But what can distinguish the ODL institutions of the future is their degree of 'openness' as opposed to the closure of many other providers. Two, the future of ODL institutions is closely tied to the future of technology and success will depend on how it can be effectively harnessed in the interests of people, places and pedagogy. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-25 (Higher Education), sees blended learning as the 'staple pedagogical approach' in all higher learning institutions.

Three, the international community has identified 17 Sustainable Development Goals of which Goal 4 focuses on education. The objective of this Goal is to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all' by 2030. Open and distance learning will have a wider definition and a more important role to play in opening up access not only to education but also in supporting the achievement of development goals. But in order to do this, we need more innovation. As your Education Blueprint states 'Malaysia aspires to make innovation a major driver of national economic growth' [Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education)].

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 in their book *The Innovators' DNA* have distilled the five skills that all innovators share. Let me just refer to four: questioning, observing, networking and experimenting. What do we mean?

Innovators ask questions all the time. Asking simple questions can often lead to profound discoveries. As Tata said 'question the unquestionable'. 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.

Let me share the example of a former alumnus of Wawasan Open University and a graduate of the CEMBA programme. His name is Raymond Loh, an innovator who started a moving and relocation service which now has a presence in 40 countries. And Raymond did all this in his early fifties!

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.

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. Let's each do our part!