
KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen of the academic community

It is indeed a privilege to be invited to address this learned gathering for the International Research Conference on Open & Distance Learning. Being the only open and distance learning institution, the Open University of Sri Lanka has made a significant contribution towards nation building during the last three decades.

I am pleased to see that OUSL has many overseas links that have made this international conference a great success. I am sure we can learn lessons from our neighbors in Asia and other regions of the world as we try to make this country of 20 million people the knowledge hub of Asia, one of the five hubs Mahinda Chintana has presented to the people. For the benefit of those who have come from outside, MC is the Election Manifesto that His Excellency, Mahinda Rajapaksa, presented to the country at the last election.

When we look at the theme for the Conference; “The role of open and distance learning in the 21st Century: Challenges and Possibilities”, I believe you have more possibilities and opportunities than challenges. Even the challenges need to be perceived as opportunities. Possibilities are endless when one has creativity.

The fundamental challenge is for every country to create a culture of life-long learning for its citizens. From ancient times, our people had a positive attitude to learn and that is what elevated the country to a highly literate nation. We have taken a giant step to increase the ICT literacy. This was 5% in 2004 and now it is estimated to be over 28%. Despite these achievements, we need to do more. We do not need more physical structures as in the past, but strategic ICT tools to develop our human resources for the future. These ICT tools will eliminate the geographical discrimination that is imposed on the population.

ICT-based distance learning can be a substitute for traditional learning channels and they can also serve as supplements for existing learning facilities under a

blended-learning environment. ICT has paved the way for many people who were deprived of formal educational channels to forge ahead. Many Sri Lankan institutes have developed platforms for open and distance learning. The government is now ready to provide the '3C's essential for education: Computers, Content and the Connectivity. Ensuring the quality and equitable distribution of these 3 Cs is the challenge for the government.

The Presidential Task Force on English & IT has innovated a number of activities with the assistance of the private sector. The applicability of these tools for the current and future learning generations needs to be constantly monitored to ensure high impact. The average cost of a PC is decreasing drastically and many internet service operators provide competitive rates for high-speed access.

As in every case, the human factor plays a key role in developing content that suits local communities in local languages. It is equally important to regularly upgrade the content and make them available at an affordable price to those who deserve. Readily available content management tools are now available with young people who seek new knowledge with a great thirst for it. I am aware of a group of Sri Lankan teachers and university lecturers volunteered to develop content in the local languages for an innovative PC under the 'One Laptop Per Child' (OLPC) project.

Using current ICT tools, the student is in a learner - centered educational environment and he has to play a central role in the education process as he will seek knowledge from everywhere. It is like a 360 degree process. This is in contrast to the traditional teacher centered and textbook based education which I see in the dimension of a straight line. ICT helps creating virtual platforms for distance learning and many disadvantaged communities would benefit from it without any doubt.

A revolution is already taking place in the way we learn and from where we learn. Most of us in our secondary and tertiary level education went through the traditional ways of learning. We used printed books as our learning resource. However, today, we have the benefit of downloading chunks and chunks of learning and reading material on to our computer. One doesn't need a piece of paper. 'Learning without a piece of paper'; it is a very strange thought. But that is happening today. Look at the whole concept of eBooks. Most of them are free of charge, others are as cheap as 1 or 2 dollars. Amazon.com, the web based book seller, has created an innovative reading device for ebooks, known as Kindle.

Amazon Kindle is a software and hardware platform developed by Amazon.com (subsidiary Lab126) for the rendering and displaying of e-books and other digital media. Four hardware devices, colloquially and unofficially known as "Kindle", "Kindle 2", "Kindle 3", and "Kindle DX" support this platform. Kindle software applications exist for Microsoft Windows, iOS, Blackberry, Mac OS X and

Android. Amazon's first hardware device, the Kindle First Generation, was released only in the United States on November 19, 2007. The latest hardware device, the 3rd generation Kindle with 3G support for use in 100 countries and territories, was announced on July 28, 2010.

Let me digress to another aspect. We all have to face a serious challenge - It is not to learn things but how to 'unlearn' things. Updating knowledge on how to tap new sources of information is crucial. We have now come to an era in which we cannot sometimes answer the questions raised by small children. The power acquired through money and official status is now being replaced by technological know-how. ICT has created a long list of employment opportunities. Though our generation was familiar with school masters, station masters and postmasters, the new generation got familiar with webmasters. Now, we have even passed the era of webmasters and it is the era of 'wiki-masters' and 'blogmasters'. Many unreported indigenous knowledge can, therefore, be brought into the public domain using ICT. Kids of Sri Lanka's remote villages have started promoting their villages in the international arena using their own websites, blogs and email groups. Refer to Mahavilachchiya.

These are important developments in the domain of learning. But, there is another aspect we should not overlook. From a human angle, a matter of great concern are the travails of those who have wearily, yet resolutely, paddled up the education scheme to the very threshold of State Universities only to have their strivings shifted when they find no room inside. In the nature of things, it is a part of unavoidable human woes. In the circumstances, driven by unquenchable aspirations for university degrees, those with means go to foreign universities opening a drain of financial resources behind them. Only a low percentage enrolls in the Open University. There are others who settle for professional courses conducted by private sector non-university institutions. They, having no illusions about universities, had thought it wise to enroll fairly early in their student careers, with great profit to themselves and to the community.

When we look at this conglomeration of founts of learning, we see no lack in the matter of educational spread. What is necessary is to rationalize this framework to produce the kind and quality of skill useful for development purposes. In an overall sense, time is opportune in Sri Lanka to move towards what is described as a "Knowledge economy". Simply, it means the application of knowledge to development. This concept has been acclaimed in the global economy as a recipe for rapid growth.

It appears that knowledge inputs dominate this entire formula. To obtain full benefits of this growth prescription, we have to re-orient our educational system to enhance quality at all educational levels and in certain key areas of knowledge. We have to aim at professional and scientific excellence and proficiency in ICT and English language and promotional activity in research and training. These

reforms will necessarily entail a big outlay of public expenditure in education. But, there can be no doubt that the benefits expected will far outweigh the cost. It is also vital to secure the active participation of the private sector in this endeavor.

Over a period of time, a lot of tinkering has been done in our system of education, at the behest of individuals rather than a body of cohesive and rational thinkers. That has resulted in rather a disjointed system that leaves the student totally unprepared for the world of work that he or she enters on completion of school education. There is much that one learns, post school. This is where the open universities, virtual universities, distance learning modalities can contribute to the numerous ways of natural learning for those who seek knowledge. Unfortunately, we do not provide the right ingredients during school life so as to enable young school leavers to engage in continuous, open or distance education. We make our students the slaves of another human being, the teacher. Without that human interface cannot a student learn? That is where we need to look at.

In a national context, there is another important aspect. Whether it is class room learning or virtual learning, our education systems must ensure that we produce patriotic citizens. Even distant and open education cannot shun that responsibility.

As much as we characterize or identify Japanese through certain well defined criteria, an attempt must be made to craft a definition for a true Sri Lankan. Some of the major characteristics that I advocate for a Sri Lankan are being:

- i. patriotic
- ii. courteous
- iii. disciplined
- iv. punctual
- v. productive and
- vi. valuing team work

There may be many more that can be included here. But, this grouping encapsulates the bare essentials.

There can be any number of subjects taught, but each subject must have a distinct bearing on the student, it must positively impact on the quality of life of the individual and relate to our cultures, values and what we stand for. Our education must help us to wade through life which is full of vicissitudes and the foundation for such a state of mind whilst developed by the school, and supported by parents at home, must also be supplemented by distance, virtual or any other mode of learning. We cannot prepare every child to be a doctor, an engineer, a lawyer or some other professional. There are many occupations that contribute

to the well being of the fabric of society. There must be a division of labor. However, every child must be prepared for the unpredictability of life. That is where education must concentrate.

A groundbreaking thought based on the Theory of Multiple Intelligences postulated by the renowned educationist, Professor Howard Gardner at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, brought a paradigm shift in the way we learn and what we learn. In his book, *Frames of Mind*, first published in 1984, Prof Gardner reveals the prerequisites of intelligence. (Quote) "To my mind, a human intellectual competence must entail a set of skills of problem solving - enabling the individual to resolve genuine problems or difficulties that he or she encounters and, when appropriate to create an effective product - and must also entail the potential for finding or creating problems - thereby laying the groundwork for the acquisition of new knowledge." (unquote).

Gardner demonstrates that there exist multiple human intelligences, common to all cultures - each with its own patterns of development and brain activity, and each different in kind from the others. These potentials include Linguistic, Musical, Logical - mathematical capacities, Spatial, Bodily - kinesthetic intelligences as well as the ability to arrive at an emotional and mental sense of self and other people. Rather than reducing an individual's potential to a single score on an IQ test, it is the fostering and education of all these intelligences that should be our concern.

We must look to the future and understand the demands it will place on our country and its people. We must also not just dismantle institutions and make new ones. What must be done is to re-invigorate the institutions and encourage them to re-think their strategy in terms of the emerging needs of our nation.

Finally, let us hope we succeed in equipping our minds with the requisite knowledge to lead us to a more abundant world. The next generation could carry forward the chain of progress with lighter steps.

Before I wind up, please permit me to leave a thought behind for you to ponder. It is a saying of R.D. Laing, a Scottish Psychiatrist. "The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds."