

Valedictory to NSOU PAD session 2024-11-19

Good evening NSOU colleagues. It is a pleasure to make some remarks to close this professional development session that you have been holding. I speak to you from Vancouver, Canada, where it is nearly six o'clock in the morning.

I have very good memories of my several visits to NSOU and the privilege of receiving an honorary doctorate from your university back in 2005, when Surabhi Banerjee was your vice-chancellor.

I am pleased to hear that Netaji Subhas Open University continues to thrive and is a leader among India's open universities. I expect that one reason for your success is that you engage in professional development for your academics and staff.

I have been involved with open universities for over 50 years, so I am a veteran of distance learning. In 1972 I spent six months as an unpaid intern at the British Open University, then in its second year of operation. That experience was a revelation that changed my life. I saw the future of higher education and wanted to be part of it.

In this short talk I shall go back to basics. Others are more qualified than I to talk to you about the role of artificial intelligence in higher education today. My title is simply: "Open Universities: Open to What"? Why do we call ourselves open universities and what does that word 'open' mean for what we do?

The history of distance education goes back many years. I'm sure it had beginnings here in India centuries ago. But I will focus on the emergence of open universities, which occurred in Britain in the 1960s. I will pass over the fascinating record of the origins of the UK Open University and leap straight to its formal creation by Royal Charter in July 1969, which happened also to be the week when man first landed on the moon. That timing reinforced the notion that an open university was a very modern phenomenon.

Presiding over the Open University's inaugural charter ceremony was its first chancellor, Lord Geoffrey Crowther, who was then the Editor of The Economist newspaper. I shall quote extracts from the extraordinary speech that he made to that ceremony. He began:

"This is the Open University. Many people have tried, with indifferent success, to define a university. I shall not add to their number. But we are the Open

University, and it is fitting that I should try to outline on what that claim is based and what we take it to mean.

*" We are open, first, as to **people**.*

"Not for us the carefully regulated escalation from one educational level to the next by which the traditional universities establish their criteria for admission.

"We took it as axiomatic," said the Planning Committee, "that no formal academic qualifications would be required for registration as a student."

Anyone could try his or her hand, and only failure to progress adequately would be a bar to continuation of studies.

"The first, and most urgent task before us is to cater for the many thousands of people, fully capable of a higher education, who, for one reason or another, do not get it, or do not get as much of it as they can turn to advantage, or as they discover, sometimes too late, that they need. Only in recent years have we come to realise how many such people there are, and how large are the gaps in educational provision through which they can fall. The existing system, for all its expansion, misses and leaves aside a great unused reservoir of human talent and potential.

"Men and women drop out through failures in the system, through disadvantages of their environment, through mistakes of their own judgement, through sheer bad luck. These are our primary material. To them we offer a further opportunity. Almost we can say, like the Statue of Liberty in New York harbour, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the open door."

"But if this were all, we could hardly call ourselves a university. This is not simply an educational rescue mission - though that is our first task, and we do not decry it. But we also aim wider and higher. Wherever there is an unprovided need for higher education, supplementing the existing provision, there is our constituency. There are no limits on persons.

*"We are open as to **places**. This University has no cloisters - a word meaning closed. Hardly even shall we have a campus. By a very happy chance, our only local habitation will be in the new city of Milton Keynes. But this is only where*

the tip of our toe touches ground; the rest of the University will be disembodied and airborne. From the start it will flow all over the United Kingdom.

" But it is already clear that wherever the English language is spoken or understood, or used as a medium of study, and wherever there are men and women seeking to develop their individual potentialities beyond the limits of the local provision, there we can offer our help.

"There are no boundaries of space.

*" We are open as to **methods**. Our original name was the University of the Air. I am glad that it was abandoned, for even the air would be too confining. Already the development of technology is marching on, and I predict that, before long, broadcasting will form only a small part of the Open University's output. The world is caught in a communications revolution, the effects of which will go beyond those of the industrial revolution of two centuries ago. Then the great advance was the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's muscles. Now the great new advance is the invention of machines to multiply the potency of men's minds. As the steam engine was to the first revolution, so the computer is to the second. It has been said that the addiction of the traditional university to the lecture room is a sign of its inability to adjust to the development of the printing press. That, of course, is unjust. But at least no such reproach will be levelled at the Open University in the communications revolution. Every new form of human communication will be examined to see how it can be used to raise and broaden the level of human understanding.*

"There is no restriction on techniques.

*"We are open, finally, as to **ideas**. It has been said that there are two aspects of education, both necessary. One regards the individual human mind as a vessel, of varying capacity, into which is to be poured as much it will hold of the knowledge and experience by which human society lives and moves. This is the Martha of education - and we shall have plenty of these tasks to perform. But the Mary regards the human mind rather as a fire which has to be set alight and blown with the divine afflatus. This also we take as our ambition.*

What a happy chance it is that we start on this task, in this very week when the Universe has opened. The limits not only of explorable space, but of human understanding, are infinitely wider than we have believed.

There you have it. I have quoted large parts of Crowther's historic speech simply because, 55 years after he delivered it, I believe it should still inspire our work in open universities. He gave us aspirations against which to assess the many new technologies and methods that have emerged in the half-century since the Open University's inauguration.

He gave the Open University its slogan, motto or strapline: 'open to people, open to places, open to methods, open to ideas.'

How do open universities, how does Netaji Subhas Open University, measure up against those four criteria today?

I shall spend my last few minutes in addressing that question generally.

I encourage you, in the days ahead, to ask yourselves how NSOU judges its own performance on the 'four opens'.

Here I shall concentrate on 'open to people' and 'open to ideas'. Fifty years of technological developments have made it easier for open universities and, indeed all universities, to be open to places. I expect that NSOU's reach to people outside West Bengal and India has increased in the 20 years since I visited you in Kolkata.

I suspect that your teaching methods have diversified as well and that some of you are already exploring the opportunities presented by artificial intelligence.

But are you more open to people? Is your student body becoming more diverse? Are students who come to you with weaker academic backgrounds being more successful than they used to be? Our goal for students must not merely be 'access to learning', but 'access to successful learning'. Are you using new technologies and methods to give students access to success?

I worry that as we focus on all the new wonders of technology, we can forget that the aim of creating open universities was to bring the joys and successes of learning to wider and wider sections of the population.

Finally, are we 'open to ideas'? There are worrying signs in today's world that intellectual freedoms are being curtailed. Some governments, even in countries that claim to uphold free speech, are banning books and trying to gag some academics and journalists.

What should open universities do about this? I suggest that we have a special responsibility to uphold truth and objectivity because we are public institutions that attract large numbers of students.

When asked what the most significant innovation of the British Open University was, the founding vice-chancellor, Walter Perry, replied that it was the course team. It was the use of a team, often quite a large team, of academics and other specialists to design the courses and prepare the materials. The vigorous debates within these teams were an important mechanism for ensuring that biased and partisan views were not presented in the courses. The UKOU course teams also checked that photos and images presented in learning materials gave a representative portrayal of the populations they described.

Because open universities can invest unusually large resources in course design and preparation, I suggest that they have a responsibility to move academic thinking forward and be pioneers in presenting new and challenging views. How does NSOU see its role in this regard? Do you follow other universities in the way you present your courses, or are they sometimes inspired by you?

I shall leave it there. Thank you for inviting me to talk to you. Please keep the open university flag flying high by being true to your founding principle of openness.

Thank you.