The University of Fiji Hosts Commonwealth Youth Forum

The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Prem Misir's Keynote Speech

The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Prem Misir delivering the Keynote Address at the Commonwealth Youth Forum.

The University of Fiji hosted a successful Commonwealth Youth Forum on February 20, 2018.

The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Prem Misir, Keynote Speaker at the Commonwealth Youth Forum, highlighted youth and student engagement, non-formal education, accessibility and employability. The following was his message to attendees of the Youth Forum:

"Today, the world has the most young people on planet earth than at any other time in recorded history, clearly the ingredients for unparalleled economic and social progress. But this progress seems to have an attribute of sustained elusiveness.

Today The University of Fiji has an engagement with the young people of the Commonwealth. But first what do we mean when we use the term 'youth'?

I suspect that we could conceive of youth as, where childhood is left behind and the foundational years in the age group 15- 29 (640 million) extend into the future. As a youth, you are not a child, yet you are not a full adult. And so, it was timely then in 1973 to establish the Commonwealth Youth Program.

This is the Commonwealth Youth Forum, a spinoff from the current Council of Commonwealth Education Ministers Meeting in Fiji. Essentially, both the Forum and the education ministers'meeting attempt to fulfill the values and aspirations of the Commonwealth Charter. And you may know that the Commonwealth comprises 53 diverse nations and in excess of 80 organizations. 39 of the 53 nations are small and vulnerable. 2.4 billion people, about a third of the global population. 60% of this population is under age 30. In fact, at this time, there are 1.8 billion youth population between the ages of 10 and 24; 90% live in commonwealth countries; and 1 in 3 live in less developed countries. Indeed, ASIA-Pacific with 29%, South Asia with 26%, and Sub-Saharan Africa with 15% have the largest global youth populations. Actually, about 87% of young people live in developing countries. Undoubtedly, young people are a formidable force on the global stage, where many may not have the wherewithal to forge a better world environment partly because some countries experience demographic dividend and other do not. Demographic dividend may happen when a population changes from a situation of many dependents and relatively few working-age people to a situation of many working-age people with fewer dependents.

Many of these young people have no jobs, especially in developing nations, which continue to increase its graduates with poor prospects of active employment. Accompanying this sustained youth unemployment in large parts of the developing world also is that this generation of youth remains trapped in an insecure and unpredictable global environment, a situation for which adults must bear moral responsibility for its creation.

But the young people globally should not become despondent with this ugliness that penetrates their lives. Young people can rise to the occasion to remove this uncertainty to make this world a better place. Two sayings from Rabindranath Tagore provide some insights on how to see the current painful global environment that young people inhabit: "Today's youth is tomorrow's future."
Shake off the old and diseased, unleash your endless spirit."

Young people must create an age of charity and kindliness and pursue its reinforcement. The production of this age of humanity is a necessity and of utmost urgency, as some of your other folks, the older ones, continue to abuse the world with extreme violence and ethno-religious conflicts. And so if the world needs this caring age, it is now. And the youth can transform this caring philosophy into practice through the rubric of the sustainable development goals and the Commonwealth Charter.

In 2013, the UNFPA and UNICEF presented sustainable development, thus: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Implicit in this definition is the idea that in order to meet the social and economic needs of people today and in the future, there must be continued efforts towards poverty eradication, human rights, and equity, as well as sustainable consumption and protection of our natural resources" (UNFPA, 2010; UNICEF, 2013).

Given that nearly 50% of the world is under age 30, young people are the most pivotal to be the accountability hub for the 17 SDGs and their 169 targets. Five Ps capture the spirit and essence of these SDGs: People, Planet, Peace, Prosperity, and Partnerships. And since young people really are assets for national development, they can certainly play an active role in implementing this new people-centred, people-led accountability mechanisms, in order to realize the SDGs 2030 agenda. Specifically, young people can be part of the follow-up, review, and accountability framework, only if young people experience empowerment to hold governments and duty-bearers accountable, a vital channel of execution for the SDG agenda that "leaves no one behind".

But in order for this empowerment to succeed, first we must review the current baseline conditions of young people. Based on the Youth development Index Report of 2016, young people made substantial progress in civic engagement, that is, stronger interface with communities; and there was increased progress in access to education.

At the same time, the Youth Development Index Report of 2016 noted stark gaps in youth development, thus:

• About 75% of the global youth population are residing in countries with a low to medium level of youth development, where countries do not have the capacity to provide adequately for their young people.
• Gaps in countries with low to high youth development are evident in education, health services, financial inclusion, and digital technology; in these situations, females are at a disadvantage compared to their male peers.
•Countries high on youth development did not do well on drug abuse and mental disorder, when compared to countries low on youth development.

•In all countries, young people are two times likely to be unemployed compared to adults, notwithstanding they are more educated and qualified than their parents' generation.
•Youth development is lethargic in countries with a large youth population; and about 25% of the youth population comes from developing countries; producing a large disaffected young population, ingredients for instability.
•Youth are also victims of violent crimes and conflict in a uneven way - worldwide.

Such unadulterated fissures in youth development require immediate and sustainable solutions, if youth empowerment is ever going to become a reality.

And so, accomplishing the SDG 2030 agenda requires the institution of a knowledge-based economy, which, in turn, necessitates a good match of graduates into employment positions. But the situation facing young people now suggests that there are mismatches between young people's skills and those that employers want; absence of labour market information; and reduced access to financial and other business services.

Some corrective measures which must come from tertiary education, should include:

•Identifying factors producing work-readiness graduates.
•Developing graduate attributes instrumental for honing employability skills.
•Facilitating employability and learning through learning outcomes.

Young people need to be more active and pro-active in can critically reviewing learning outcomes in tertiary education, in order to ensure that that their education, both formal and non-formal, leads to the application of feasible learning and to make certain that this education facilitates their empowerment. Here are some examples of learning outcomes in, say, a course outline in tertiary education:

•The degree program provided up-to-date knowledge
•The degree program developed my capability to use ideas and information
•The degree program developed my ability to test ideas and evidence
•The degree program gave me the ability to generate new ideas and evidence
• The degree program enabled personal development
•The degree program developed my capacity to plan and manage self-learning" (Sumanasiri, Erabaddage Gishan Tharanga; Yajid, Mohd Shukri Ab; Khatibi, Ali. 2015).

Young people in tertiary education must become watchdogs of their learning outcomes.If young people as graduates have employability, then they have the capacity to secure a satisfying job.

There is no question that the SDG agenda 2030 will go nowhere without the growth of a knowledge society. And again, this growth requires young people from diverse backgrounds to have access to tertiary education. Their accessibility may be problematic in many parts of the Commonwealth. Again, there is no question that access to knowledge supports every societal objective in a democracy. And perhaps, too, access to knowledge should inform any reconceptualization of higher education.

Sometimes in the drive to enhance accessibility, there is a debate between equity and excellence – educate a small number of people, but with higher standards; or increase access to education and perhaps accepting a lower performance standard. The connection between equity and excellence is a zero-sum tradeoff between these two situations. A new model of tertiary education must present equity to mean that all academically qualified persons, , including poor students, or those students in rural or remote areas, or students from particular ethnic or linguistic minorities, should have a chance for admission, irrespective of their socioeconomic status (SES).

Nevertheless, school knowledge is only part of the process to transition to a successful adult life; there is need, too, for non-formal education; also, there is need for job-competitive skills, and to embrace a high-tech world as digital natives with appropriate digital literacy or e-kills. At the moment in many parts of the developing world, there is a global crisis of deteriorating youth unemployment, even as young people clamour for decent work. And possibly, the work of youth organizations as an example of non-formal education, may address this issue of sustained youth unemployment.

Youth organisations and employability (YOE) database with data from about 1000 young people in 40 European countries addressed the outcomes of involvement in youth organisations. The analysis indicates that the kinds of the involvement in youth organisations are better predictors of outcomes on employability than are personal attributes of young people. Policy implications demand better policy support to boost opportunities for the participation of young people from lower SES in youth organisations and for advising young people of the advantages of sustained participation with youth organisations.

Tertiary education must embrace formal, informal, and non-formal education.

The fulfillment of this idea requires the pursuit of interdisciplinarity.

Tagore captures this insight so well, thus:

"The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence." (Tagore).

After all the rhetoric to engage youth in this mew mantle of leadership, the end-goal is their empowerment, if they are to play any role in shaping and changing this insecure and unpredictable global environment, to construct and, perhaps, reconstruct a better world for all."
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The Youth Forum was also attended by the Honourable Minister of Education, Heritage and Arts, Honourable Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Chair of the Commonwealth Students Associations, Ms. Maisha Reza, Mr. Mark Albon, representative from the Commonwealth Secretariat as well as Commonwealth Youth Section members.

Speaking at the Forum, Minister of Education, Honourable Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum stated that student bodies need to maintain a certain level of impartiality to be able to speak independently as a critical voice on various subjects. "The moment the impartiality is compromised by any student organisation, the ability to speak on a whole range of issues will be compromised. Then you can truly become an independent voice and a critic of policies and various issues taking place in your country and even in the education sector," he stated.

The Honourable Minister also spoke about the recent Youth Entrepreneurship Scheme (YES), which made funds available to young entrepreneurs to advocate graduates to become job creators as opposed to job seekers.

The Forum was divided into three sessions: Youth Employability and Entrepreneurship, Non-Formal Education and Student Governance/Participation and discussed the topic of educations, its importance to youth, accessibility of quality education, employability after graduation and the development of a knowledge-based society.

The University of Fiji thanks the Attorney General and Minister of Education, Honourable Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum and the Commonwealth Secretariat for being part of the productive Forum and contributing towards the discussion which will benefit all.