

Welcome Speech
Prof. Dr. Ram Kantha Makaju Shrestha,
Vice Chancellor, Kathmandu University,
Special Convocation Ceremony of Kathmandu University
(15 March 2019)

Rt. Hon'ble Prime Minister and Chancellor of Kathmandu University, Mr. KP Sharma Oli;
Special Guest of the Ceremony, Prof. Dr. Jean Claude Badoux;
Honorable Minister of Education, Science and Technology and Pro-Chancellor of Kathmandu University, Mr. Giriraj Mani Pokharel;
Honorable Ministers, and Former Ministers;
Your Excellencies;
Members of the University Senate;
Members of the Board of Trustees;
Members of the Kathmandu University Family;
The Media Community; and
Distinguished Guests;

It is an honor to welcome you all in Kathmandu University today. Thank you for gracing us with your presence at this auspicious moment, the special convocation to confer the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters to Prof. Jean Claude Badoux, distinguished civil engineer and academician, and a very good friend of Kathmandu University and Nepal. It is both an honor and a pleasure for us all to bestow this highest degree on Prof. Badoux in recognition of all he has done for Nepal and for mankind. His work has led to unprecedented collaborations and outputs in the field of science and technology.

Let me take this opportunity to share some of my thoughts on universities and development.

Universities can and should emerge as the forerunners of national development. However, this requires a substantial revisit of our understanding and approach to higher education.

Obviously, universities need to respond to changing times. The world today is moving and morphing at a dizzying speed, especially given the rapid changes in

technology and communication. The boundaries between disciplines are blurring and new fields are emerging before our eyes.

Terms that were unknown even a decade ago are now buzz words. Everything is changing: the way we study; the way we seek information; the way we gather knowledge; the way we communicate; the way we manage people and organizations; and the way we think about future. However, there is still a major lag in how we in education address these changes. As Universities we should not only catch up with these transformations; we should be leading them.

First and foremost, we need to develop and tailor academic programs that suit these new and relevant themes to make them more contextual. We must be innovative and also nimble enough to designing new programs and not simply hold onto our old, conventional programs.

Here at KU, for example, we can point with some pride to recently-developed programs in mountain architecture, sustainable development, global health and ethno-musicology.

Whenever we talk about these new, previously-unheard-of disciplines, people ask us about their scope. They wonder whether graduates will get jobs after their education, if there is risk to their careers, and so on.

Well, I think those who ask such questions may be missing the point. I do not believe that developing programs only in the areas that have ironclad, guaranteed employment scope is the correct approach. Academic institutions should do more than simply walk on the roads that already exist. We should be creating new avenues where thousands others will tread.

Let us set new trends, rather than just following set-trends. Let us explore new horizons, rather than cozily settling with the comfortable past. Our past successes do not guarantee future success. Let us take small, but courageous steps into uncharted territories rather than just standing on the established foundations. These first steps will be the stepping stones for larger victories. As the famous Artist Vincent van Gogh said, 'Great things are not done by impulse, but by a series of small things brought together.'

This sort of experiment requires an environment and administrative mechanisms that welcome emerging professionals and youths. It requires simplified and

easier processes within the University so that we can create new programs, centers and institutes.

An administration that is built with the fabric of complex hierarchies and complicated bureaucracies will crumble under its own weight. In an effort to avoid risks, let us not restrict the need to experiment. In an age where people in their twenties and thirties are creating history in innovation, we need to create a system to support, nurture and promote young minds. In the context of Nepal, this also means creating platforms for the engagement of the Nepali diaspora, our alumni and other interested professionals. This year Kathmandu University will convene a special meeting of Nepali diaspora professionals to specifically explore how their expertise can be harnessed to strengthen academia in Nepal.

Second, collaborative mechanisms between universities and other non-University institutions must be more flexible. If every field is connected to academia in some way, why is there still so much disconnect between and among them?

If Universities are the engines for national development, we should have a dedicated wing within ministries to connect with academia. Likewise, Universities should have structures dedicated to connecting with their potential partners in the community, government, industries, foundations, and so on. We also need to re-activate our existing collaborations and seek new collaborations to help bring a breath of fresh air into our academic environment.

I am glad that the rapid expansion of international collaboration within KU is accelerating this pursuit. Our recent establishment of an Office for Community Engagement will also help bridge the gap.

At this age, it is no longer possible to work in single disciplinary silos. Designing academic and research consortia, strengthening complementary partnerships are the only way to move ahead. Almost all of the projects that led to scientific breakthroughs have been huge collaborative projects – be it CERN in Switzerland, the 22 country-led European Organization for Nuclear Research, or the multinational International Space Station.

We must decide whether we want to grow together, or fail in isolation.

KU has already forged alliances with several other key organizations in different areas. For example, consider our recent partnership with Khopasi Hydropower,

which serves as a wet-lab for engineering students; or our siting the music department at Tripurasundari temple; or our partnership with the Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIDS) for policy studies; or our School of Medical Sciences's large and growing network of rural health and community development programs. These are just a few examples.

Through the recent establishment of Nepal Technology Innovation Center (NTIC), Kathmandu University aims to provide additional catalytic support to our students, faculties and staffs in harnessing the strengths of a multi-disciplinary and multi-sectorial approach to academia, research and development. We will continue to create new entities within our institution and build new modalities of partnerships to fulfill our mission and preserve our values.

Let us widen the scope of our university beyond the boundaries of our buildings, to the larger community. We must not wait for opportunities to come to us, but rather proactively seek, create and hold them. This has been my own professional and personal experience as well as a firm belief.

Third and most importantly, we must categorically reject what I like to call **'the disaster of mediocrity'**. The founders of this University rightly framed its mission 'To provide Quality Education for Leadership'. Quality is the heart and soul of this institution.

Accepting mediocre achievements has far more detrimental impacts than we may assume. Mediocrity hinders sustainability because it does not generate attention, respect or trust. Mediocrity consumes, rather than creates its own resources. Excellence, on the other hand, may appear to require more resources, but in the long run, excellence sustains itself. A small diamond fetches more than a heap of rocks. For a product as trivial as a knife, Switzerland created a brand of a Swiss-knife. For a product as common as chocolate, Switzerland built an empire of Swiss chocolates. Commitment to quality requires relentless determination, dedication and perseverance. **Aristotle correctly said, 'Quality is not an act, but a habit.'**

I reject the notion that we are not able to produce high-quality programs because we lack resources. On the contrary, I think, we are oblivious to, or ignore the resources we already have. What stops us from creating world-class educational and research programs in areas that are unique to us? I see opportunities everywhere.

I see no reasons why Nepal can't be the world's premier destination to learn about tourism and hospitality management, hydropower development, Buddhist studies, natural resource management, community engagement in governance, and so on. However, we need to build gem-like, high-quality programs of unparalleled excellence and uniqueness. Only then will the world follow us. The identity of a University, the status of a University, the category of a University is defined by nothing else but by the quality of its programs, the changes it brings to the society, and the commitment demonstrated by its members.

Let me end this speech with a call to all those who would like to join hands with us in developing Universities in Nepal as the Forerunners of Development. Let us challenge our thoughts, critique our beliefs and argue against our ideas, but all in constructive ways.

As a University family, we have to stand together to fight against the maladies of the society. As a University family, our biggest rivalries must not be internal. Rather, they should be with the forces that hinder our nation's development, with the ignorance that ditches opportunities, with the inertia that refuses change. We are the architects of the new educational revolution.

In the end, our legacy will be defined by nothing but the impact we leave to future generations.

Thank you!!