

UoM Innovation Week 2020

Speech by Professor D Jhurry, Vice-Chancellor

Opening Ceremony - Monday 30 November 2020

- **Mr R Meettook**, Senior Chief Executive, Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology
- **Dr Louis Jean Claude Autrey**, Chancellor, University of Mauritius
- **Mr Preaduth Chitamun**, Pro-Chancellor & Chairman of Council, University of Mauritius
- **Professor S K Sobhee**, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academia)
- **Associate Professor Dr M Santally**, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Planning & Resources)
- Parliamentary Private Secretaries
- Members of the Diplomatic Corps
- University Staff & Students
- Distinguished Guests
- Ladies & Gentlemen

All Protocols observed,

Good Morning.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you today at this Opening Ceremony of the UoM Innovation Week 2020, a first of its kind event being organised by the University of Mauritius. Our aim is to bring together academia, the public sector and the private sector together for enhanced Government-

Academia-Industry interactions in view of stimulating an innovation and entrepreneurship culture in Mauritius, which is the theme of this first Innovation Week.

At the University of Mauritius, we put Innovation right at the heart of our vision for a modern University back in March 2017. It was a way to contribute more effectively and in a more impactful manner to the country's development. We worked on several fronts to build the ecosystem to transform that vision into concrete actions. In 2019, we reengineered our Teaching & Learning by introducing the LCCS and intensified industry programmes. The number of PG programmes on offer has also increased.

Research is key to Innovation. It was important to change gear and boost research output. We invested a lot into funding research through a bottom-up as well as a top-down approach; we created Poles of Research Excellence and Poles of Innovation which gave an incredible encouragement to academic staff; we re-organised the Doctoral School. The outputs are tangible: significant increase in the number of research publications, overall funding for research increased 6-7 fold, new MPhil/PhD registration on the rise.

I am happy to announce that we have recently been accepted as an Associate Member of the African Research University Alliance (ARUA).

Developing the concept of an entrepreneurial university also forms an integral part of that modernization strategy. The UoM Agri-Tech Park, which is a platform to develop modern agriculture in collaboration with the public and private sectors is now a reality. The setting-up of the e-Library is another major achievement in the digital transformation of the UoM. Access to information and knowledge being crucial for innovation, the e-Library has been a major tool for our students and staff during the confinement. UoM also extended access to the Mauritian public free of charge during the sanitary curfew.

Innovation cannot be developed in a nutshell. We have to work closely with the public and private stakeholders. We have set up with the Traffic Management and Road Safety Unit of the Ministry of Land Transport and Light Rail a Road Safety Observatory. We are also currently working closely with the Ministry of Environment on the setting up of an *Observatoire de l'Environnement*, which will include a Research Environment Observatory to be located at the UoM.

Recently, we had discussions with Business Mauritius and Mauritian Manufacturers Association to intensify our partnerships. Key areas identified include: A better definition of training needs, developing research in the Environment & Food Sector, Working on the impact of Covid 19 on businesses and assisting enterprise in strengthening its knowledge base.

The organization of the Innovation Week, a first of its kind at the UoM and at national level, is the culmination of all our efforts to boost Innovation. This first edition will stress on the tripartite relationship between the University, the public sector and the private sector and the ecosystem required for innovation to thrive. Students, Staff, Private Sector Firms and Ministries will all be involved over the 30 November - 4 December week, putting minds together to grow innovation in our country.

The Covid19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption and diffusion of health technology innovations. The tremendous progress made worldwide in digital data and data sharing, ehealth/mhealth, new production methods for rapid and flexible manufacturing, digital health care have fundamentally changed the face of healthcare provision and huge opportunities exist for business in the sector. Digital transformation should drive positive outcomes. Mauritius has a competitive edge and the UoM is working closely with industry in that area. We have recently invested at the UoM in robotics, AI, GIS and VFX labs that should help spur innovation.

The development of a bioeconomy could be another area where a huge potential exists but will require close academia-public and private sector partnership. It is defined as the production of renewable biological resources and the conversion of these resources and waste streams into value added products, such as food, feed, bio-based products and bioenergy. This overlaps also with the idea of a circular economy championed by some groups locally. In the circular economy, the value of products, materials and

resources is maintained in the economy for as long as possible and the generation of waste minimized. The bioeconomy and circular economy have a common target which is a more sustainable and resource efficient world with a low carbon footprint and reduce dependency on fossil carbon, thus contributing to climate targets.

The concept of the bioeconomy is knowledge intensive and will require a closer university-public and private sector partnership.

A set of conditions will have to be satisfied for sustainable innovation to emerge. There is a need to groom 'eco-entrepreneurs' and assist them in developing sound business plans and clear business models as well put in place mechanisms to activate the commercialization process. From the University side, better linkages and partnerships between academia and business e.g. improving students/researchers understanding of the commercial realities and implementation issues related to sustainable innovation and facilitating better knowledge transfer.

An innovation platform that could link new ideas and opportunities of researchers to entrepreneurs and funders would certainly help in the promotion of sustainable innovation. Access to green financing will require special attention and perhaps incentives to companies to re-invest profits into sustainable innovation projects could be proposed by the Government. Some companies such as the Mauritius Commercial Bank champion the Corporate Sustainability Agenda. Why not a Corporate Sustainability

Responsibility whereby firms can re-invest a percentage of their profits into fostering innovation?

Innovation leads to wealth creation but it is also question of creating decent jobs for our graduates. The UoM alone produces some 3000 graduates each year and we are responsible for their employment. It is a must to allow these young graduates to unleash their creative potential.

Without the ability to take risks, innovation and progress cannot happen. So if you are risk averse like some prophet of dooms who see problems everywhere, it simply can't work. As an entrepreneurial university, we know that new ideas will not be accepted with immediate open arms, but we have to fight for them.

To organize this Innovation Week, we had to rely on the support of many:

- Keynote Speakers and Presenters both from local and international
- Members of the University-Industry Consultative Committee
- MCCI
- Business Mauritius
- HRDC
- NPCC
- Officers of the various Ministries
- University Academics, Administrative and Technical Staff Members
- Last but not least, University Students

I would like place on record our thanks to all academic and support staff who have worked reluctantly in coining the programme for the 5 days and making this event possible.

I seize this opportunity to also thank all our sponsors who always respond positively to our request for assistance.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you for your attention!

Prof Dhanjay Jhurry, CSK, GOSK, FAAS

Vice-Chancellor