

CITATION #1 ~ TAN SRI EMERITUS PROFESSOR GAJARAJ DHANARAJAN

- read by Jasmine Emmanuel, Deputy Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences (WOU Chancellor's Installation Ceremony, 1 Aug 2019)

Tunku Chancellor,

Tan Sri Emeritus Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan, 'Raj' as he is known to all his friends and colleagues is a soft-spoken and unassuming persona, the eldest of eight children in his family. He grew up in a British owned rubber plantation in Ipoh where his father worked as a clerk. His two hour walks through the countryside to catch the bus to a dilapidated estate Tamil school and the lessons he learnt from his mother's lap caused his inner stirrings and the passion to bring affordable and quality education for all, especially for the deprived and underprivileged. His favourite reminder that has remained with him for well over a quarter of a century were the words of the late Kader Asmal, once Minister of Education in Nelson Mandela's cabinet who said that those in educational leadership must 'do the things that we do with passion or not do it at all'. Another reminder that he always had for us at WOU is, the need to remember we are not only here for the cream, for those in front of the queue but also for the last person in the line. These words were imparted to me when I joined WOU as its first academic way back in April 2005 and were reiterated once again with the same amount of passion and dedication as we sat together for tea in his lovely home discussing key points that were to be added to this citation about him.

He was born in Ipoh in 1939. His early years were spent in a Tamil school and he later became an alumnus of Anglo-Chinese school, Ipoh. He studied at the University of Madras, obtaining BSc and MSc degrees in Biology. He then returned to Malaysia and served as a teacher in Kampar. He later pursued his postgraduate studies at Imperial College, London where he obtained a Master's degree in applied Entomology and a Diploma of the Imperial College (DIC), a postgraduate diploma. He moved on to become a Research officer at the Forest Research Institute Malaysia. In 1970, he was invited to become an academic in Biological Sciences in the then newly established Universiti Sains Malaysia where he stayed for eighteen

years. He was the first staff member to be selected under the Academic Staff Higher Education Scheme and furthered his studies at Doctorate level at the University of Aston, Birmingham in the UK. He then reassumed his duties at the School of Biological Sciences, USM.

It was during this apparently settled period of his life that his attention was drawn, to distance education. In the mid-seventies, this was a novel, indeed a revolutionary endeavour for a traditional academia. Impressed by his interest and eagerness, the then Vice-Chancellor of USM, Tan Sri Hamzah Sendut requested him to organise and coordinate the University's science programmes via distance learning. He persevered, becoming Associate Professor and Deputy Director of USM's centre for off-campus studies.

Having pioneered distance learning in Malaysia, he was invited by the Hong Kong Colonial Office to assist in the setting up the Open Learning Institute in Hong Kong (now known as Open University of Hong Kong) in 1989. His unique friendly brand of leadership saw the fledgling Open Learning Institute emerge as the provider of the highest quality open-learning courses for the working population of Hong Kong. His distinguished service and contributions were duly recognised with his appointment as CEO of the institute, where he was subsequently conferred a Professorship in 1992 and 'Professor Emeritus' in 1995. The recognition he has received for being involved for over 40 years in distance education and open distance learning led him to be directly involved and credited for the establishment of open learning systems in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, China, Taiwan, Nigeria, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Mauritius, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Indonesia, Thailand and many other countries throughout the world between 1982 to 2004.

His distinguished services on the international stage are also widely acknowledged. A testimony of this recognition are his numerous appointments as consultant to various organisations such as the World Bank, the Asian development banks, the African development banks and Caribbean development banks. He also assumed several positions at various developmental institutions such as UNESCO, UNICEF, ILO, WHO, UNHCR and numerous other organisations.

His services and in-depth knowledge in distance education and open learning witnessed his appointment as the Secretary-General of the Asian Association of Open Universities from 1991 to 1994. He was also an Executive board member of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) from 1988 to 1990 and an advisor to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature from 1983 to 1986.

In June 1995, Tan Sri Raj was appointed as the second President and Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver, Canada with the task of supporting, enhancing and promoting open learning in all 54 countries of the Commonwealth. Although he was doing very well as the CEO of the Commonwealth of Learning, when he was approached by the late Tun Dr Lim Keng Yaik and Dato' Seri Chia Kwang Chye and the well-meaning Yeap family, he agreed to return to Penang to partake in this venture to serve the educationally marginalised, underprivileged and underserved segment of our fellow citizens as he felt privileged and honoured to join them. He saw in WOU as described by the late Tun Lim and Dato' Seri Chia at their first meeting, a freshness and glimmer of hope for marginalised Malaysian working adults.

According to Tan Sri Raj, everything about Wawasan Open University – its vision, mission and values – resonated well with him. It evoked a passion that was unashamedly possessive and he was proud that we could rise up to the ideals of a caring good society envisioned by global icons like Gandhi, Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr.

As a result, Tan Sri Raj was involved in the creation of WOU right from the beginning serving as initiator, chief architect and main developer. He retired from the office of Vice-Chancellor in December 2009 at the age of 70 and from his position as Chairman of the University's Board of Governors on 28 February 2017. He also relinquished his other University positions on 31 December 2016, namely as Honorary Director of WOU's Institute for Research and Innovation (IRI) and as Chairman of the Board of Advisors of the Centre for Dialogue. Aiming to give more time and energy to his family, his lovely wife Sue who has always spoken the same language of leadership, value, mission and sustained the family with love and

warmth, his daughter Sumi, his grandchildren, he also gave up his directorship in WOU Sdn. Bhd and Wawasan Education Foundation.

His dedication, commitment and contributions towards the advancement of knowledge garnered him widespread recognition, numerous accolades and awards. Among these included the Order of Chivalry bearing the title of 'Dato' that was conferred on him in 1994. He is also the recipient of several honorary doctorates from the University of Maryland, Kota Open University of Rajasthan, University of Abertay Dundee, Athabasca University, Allama Iqbal Open University, Open University of Hong Kong, Open University of Sri Lanka, The British Open University, the Charles Sturt University and Universiti Sains Malaysia.

In 2007, he was conferred one of the nation's highest awards when His Royal Highness the Yang Di Pertuan Agong bestowed on him the Darjah Panglima Setia Makhota which carries the title 'Tan Sri' for his commitment to duty and excellent achievements on the global stage. In 2008, he was awarded Emeritus Professor by Wawasan Open University. He went on to be appointed to the United Nation's University Council for a period of six years from 2010. He has also served as a member of the Malaysian Qualifications Agency and the National Lifelong Learning Committee under the purview of the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. In 2013, he won the International Council for Open and Distance Education prize for Excellence for lifelong contribution to the field of open and distance learning,

Indeed, there can be no other person who has worked in so many countries, published so widely and addressed so many audiences, over so many years, so successfully and with such dedication to the cause of open and distance learning as Tan Sri Raj. He is without doubt one of the world's foremost distance educators and has played a very significant role in bringing this approach to teaching and learning into the mainstream of education especially for his passionate commitment to opening up access to education to all who need it, especially in Asia.

While in conversation with him, Tan Sri Raj shared that though he received these accolades with happiness, nothing brought him great joy as an educator as in this one instance during a graduation ceremony in the Open Institute of Learning, Hong

Kong, when a graduate came to the stage in a wheelchair and from amongst the numerous people who were seated in the crowd, came a little voice that shouted 'Daddy' with pride. He shared that that moment brought him so much meaning and joy because he realised he had made a difference in the life of a physically challenged person who may not have had this opportunity otherwise under normal circumstances.

Today's citation will not be complete without me quoting the words of some of us who have been his colleagues from the beginning days of WOU. In the words of Professor Madhulika, the previous DVC of WOU, "While participating at high level meetings, I learnt from Raj lessons in high-level international diplomacy and handling of outsized egos and fraying tempers with panache and dexterity while maintaining the highest level of courtesy and collegiality and not once losing focus. I still marvel at the multiple facets of this rare very accomplished leader, an institutional builder of note, a leader and a mentor par excellence but above all a constantly inspiring presence with a set of values and institutional commitment that is a role model to many." Ooi Siew Lee, the Assistant Library manager says "Tan Sri Raj is the humblest, most understanding and caring leader I have ever met in my working years in so many organisations. I faced a lot of difficulties and he was the one who guided, advised and supported me during those years. WOU is my second home because of his leadership, caring personality and integrity."

And finally a few words from me about my *Sifu*.

What is it about Tan Sri Raj that was – and, in so many ways, still is-so unique? Why is there such profound respect and admiration for him both nationally and internationally? He is a rare blend of a visionary and a pragmatic leader blessed with the ability of perceptive foresight. He is a leader with great integrity, work ethics and a sense of goodwill and concern for his staff. He has an uncanny ability to meet everyone at their own level whether it is the top notch official or the ordinary man on the street whom he greets with warm words and a fatherly smile. With extraordinary insight, he perceives the wealth of potential in each employee with a sense of purpose and confidence and made us feel proud that we belong to WOU. Thank you Tan Sri Raj, for leaving a legacy of authenticity in our lives by embodying it in your

own. You are and always will be a brilliant, completely dedicated leader and most of all a quality human being. We salute you.

Tunku Chancellor,

It is with great pleasure and a good measure of pride that I present Tan Sri Emeritus Professor Gajaraj Dhanarajan, a colossus among Malaysians, esteemed global educationist, leading advocate and expert in Open and Distance Learning, a visionary, mentor, humanitarian and a friend who is very highly regarded for his commitment, passion and vast experience in supporting and helming organisations for the uplifting of humanity.... for the degree of Doctor of Education (honoris causa).

(ENDS)