

Award Acceptance Speech

Nasira Haib

Standing here, I feel honoured, humbled and excited at the same time. No award is more prestigious than getting recognized by your alma mater!

I got admission offers from several universities, but I preferred the University of Essex because it was a progressive and modern university.

Next to a very English town, the University was a world in itself. If I remember correctly, there were students from more than forty countries, which meant the interaction of the cultures of even greater numbers. This exposure to all continents and almost all major religions and cultures broadened my mental horizon and helped me reflect and make decisions rationally and logically.

The University set high standards of learning, which encouraged analysis and independence of thinking. I must mention my interactions with Prof. Onora O'Neil. Many times, in discussions and assessment essays, I challenged her views. The way she encouraged me boosted my confidence tremendously.

Participation in students' union and societies activities added another dimension to learning and great fun. I thoroughly enjoyed discussions and debates; nothing was a taboo.

I fondly remember the beautiful lakes with ducks roaming around, the imposing towers and the busy university squares.

I came back and challenged the school education system as irrelevant, fragmented and gender-unjust. I decided to work independently for children's and women's education. I worked with the communities in suburban Ghaziabad in Lahore for thirteen years. Currently, I have been working in the villages of Sheikhupura since 1999. Thathi Bhanguaan and surrounding villages have been revolutionized. Some of the crime-hit and underserved villages have risen from six per cent to a hundred per cent literacy. Girls, who were not allowed to go to school, have attained university education and have emerged as community leaders.

In the process, I was able to pioneer an alternative approach to education that was integrative and relevant. I developed a new method of teaching literacy, informed of how children learned a language before going to school. Additionally, it was rooted in the realities of their lives.

My work earned me national and international recognition. I wrote textbooks and other educational content published, translated and taught in Pakistan and India.

The principle of relevance guided me to promote production of safe and nutrient-dense food that can mitigate climate change; climate change is a severe challenge for my country. So I have recently launched a campaign to establish one thousand organic edible gardens. I invite all to join in!

I encourage you all, who are lucky to get admission to a truly international university with excellent academic standards, to go ahead and make your mark. Excel in your work, dive into diversity, learn tolerance and always strive for a better world.

Thank you, Essex, for helping me become an independent thinker.