Thank you so much for holding this farewell dinner and for the kind and over-generous words that have just been said about me by Burchell, the Deputy Secretary-General, Janet and Asha.

I have greatly enjoyed my time at COL because, as I often say, it has brought together in a very satisfying way the three principal themes of my career: distance learning; institutional leadership; and international development. In my previous jobs just one of these themes made the greatest demands on my time, but at COL I have been able to blend them in a nicely balanced way.

In thanking you I shall recall the earliest years of COL and then refer to one of our most recent projects. You would expect me to be somewhat autobiographical.

It is now 25 years since the Commonwealth Heads of Government created COL at their meeting in Vancouver in 1987. Already that event is receding into history and some of the players are no longer with us.

My involvement in distance learning goes back to 1972. I was in my first job as an assistant professor at the University of Montreal teaching Metallurgical Engineering in French. I thought I might become a better teacher by engaging in the formal study of education, so I enrolled in a part-time Master’s programme in Educational Technology at the nearby Sir George Williams University. I don’t know what it did for my teaching, but the 3-month internship that was a requirement of the programme changed my life. In 1972 the UK Open University was in its second year of operation and already had 40,000 students.

They took me on as an unpaid intern and that summer I had the revelation of the coming revolution in higher education. Everything about the infant Open University impressed and inspired me: the scale, the idealism of the staff, the eagerness of the students, the use of media, and the way that all parts of the teaching and learning system fitted together so brilliantly. I felt that I had seen the future and wanted to be part of it and I returned to Montreal ‘no longer at ease in the old dispensation’.

Almost immediately I got a chance to join the new open university that Quebec was starting up, the Télé-université, and I was launched into a new career in distance learning. That took me on to Athabasca University as vice-president, where my involvement in institutional leadership led on to a similar post at Concordia University back in Montreal and then the presidency of Laurentian University in Ontario.
During this time I was active in both the International Council for Distance Education and the Canadian Association for Distance Education.

I think this was why I was drawn into the creation of COL. In 1987 Prime Minister Brian Mulroney hosted both the Sommet de la Francophonie, in Quebec City, and the CHOGM in Vancouver. He wanted Canada to propose initiatives involving educational technology to both gatherings and I was invited to join a little task force put together by the federal government to work up some proposals. At the time Canada was proud of its satellite technology and our proposal naturally involved that.

Meanwhile, however, another strand in the establishment of COL was being woven in London and I was involved there too. During the 1980s the UK and other rich countries sharply increased their fees for foreign university students and the Commonwealth set up a Standing Committee on Student Mobility chaired by a great Barbadian, Sir Roy Marshall.

I was called to go to London and give evidence as they explored the idea that if the students could no longer afford to go to the courses, then the courses should go to the students. The Committee commissioned a group chaired by Lord Asa Briggs, the social historian, to study this idea and its report, with the title *Towards a Commonwealth of Learning*, was also part of the input to the 1987 Vancouver CHOGM.

I was not at the CHOGM but the facts of the meeting are well known. Inspired by the proposals from Canada and the Commonwealth Secretariat the Heads of Government reviewed a proposal to create an agency to deepen Commonwealth involvement in distance education. Margaret Thatcher was opposed to the creation of another intergovernmental agency, but when Rajiv Gandhi expressed India’s support for the idea and backed it with a starting donation of $1 million in hard currency – with his Nigerian fellow Head following suit – the Commonwealth of Learning was created.

By a nice coincidence, on a flight back from Europe two weeks ago, I found myself sitting next to Jean-Yves Pinaud, a retired RCMP officer who had headed the security detail for Rajiv Gandhi at the 1987 CHOGM. He told me that they had planned to fly Prime Ministers Gandhi and Thatcher to the Heads’ retreat in the Okanagan in the same small plane, with the other heads travelling in larger groups. However Mrs. Thatcher insisted on separate planes.

Once in the Okanagan Mr. Gandhi wanted to go walking in the forest. His Indian security detail freaked out, but my RCMP friend assured them that it was OK because the whole area was sealed off by Canadian troops. So Rajiv Gandhi went walking in the forests of British Columbia both then in the morning and said that he had never had such a good time at an international meeting!

So COL was created – although without any very clear idea of what it would actually do. A little later I was called back into service to chair a planning committee, composed of distinguished officials and Commonwealth figures, to put some flesh on the bones. There were two options on the table. One was what the Briggs Report called a ‘University of the Commonwealth for Cooperation in Distance Education’. The other was an agency that would help countries do distance education for themselves rather than beam courses to them.
The Committee chose the second option. We submitted our report and at the end of 1988 Commonwealth Governments signed an MoU creating COL along those lines.

There was another little wrinkle in the story that put me in an interesting situation. Mrs Thatcher had decided that instead of making a voluntary contribution to COL’s budget like the other governments, the UK would direct its contribution to the Open University, which would provide an information service to COL.

During its meetings the Planning Committee gave the UK member, Roger Iredale, a hard time for earmarking the UK funds in this manner, suggesting to him that this was not a very collegial stance.

The irony, of course, was that a year later I became vice-chancellor of the Open University and therefore in receipt of these funds for COL. This led to a few years of sparring with COL’s first president, James Maraj, who naturally wanted the funds to come straight to COL. After a few years, to the relief of both of us, the UK decided to do this anyway.

Those then, are my recollections of the early days. Lord Briggs was COL’s first Board Chairman and I served one year on the Board in an ad personam capacity as a Canadian. When I moved to the UK I resigned because of the conflict of interest in heading the UK Open University when it was in receipt of a grant for providing services to COL. It all goes to show that you should never lock yourself too firmly into any attitude to any issue because you never know when circumstances will oblige you to take a new perspective!

I now jump forward 25 years to say how appropriate it is that I have spent a good part of my last year at COL working on a joint project with UNESCO on Fostering Governmental Support for Open Educational Resources (OER) Internationally. Open Educational Resources or OER make an interesting link to those discussions about COL’s role back in 1987.

The most well known sentence in the Briggs Report, Towards a Commonwealth of Learning, said:

“…any learner, anywhere in the Commonwealth, shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth”.

That aspiration was years ahead of its time in 1987; but is now becoming a reality at COL thanks to our commitment to Open Educational Resources in general and the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth in particular.

I am very proud that COL was the first intergovernmental body in the world to have a corporate policy on OER. It declares that wherever possible all COL’s output will be made freely available as open educational resources for re-use, re-purposing, modification and distribution.

I believe we have helped to start a movement that will, in the years to come, make it possible for learners to take courses originating from all over the world and to get recognition for their studies.

Let me also say what a pleasure it has been to work closely with UNESCO again in this OER project. I am proud of what COL and UNESCO have achieved under their joint work plan during my time as President. Much of the credit must go to our focal point at UNESCO for most of those years, Stamenka
Uvalić-Trumbić, and I am delighted that she could join us this evening. At present she is the Senior Consultant to our joint OER project where her knowledge of COL, UNESCO and also of the OECD has been invaluable.

COL is based on partnerships and one of the marvelous things about being President of COL is that I could enter into partnerships with other organisations with absolute confidence that my COL colleagues would deliver on our commitments.

In expressing my warm thanks to all COL staff I pay tribute to the Education Specialists, who are an exceptionally able and committed group, and to all the local staff who support us so well and keep the home fires burning when we are travelling. It has been a common and pleasurable experience for me to receive warm accolades about the quality and dedication of COL’s administrative staff wherever I go.

My very special thanks go to Asha Kanwar who, as my Vice-President, must take the credit for many of the good things that happened at COL on my watch. Thanks to her now have a much more focused programme and our relations with the member countries of the Commonwealth have become much more intense. One happy result is that the number of countries making voluntary contributions to our budget has doubled to over forty of the 54 member states since I arrived in 2004.

My final thanks are to the Board of Governors and our Chair, Burchell Whiteman. Sensible chief executives quickly realize that it is good to have a strong board – and COL now has the most eminent board in its history.

I was fortunate in my university career to serve under some excellent board chairs, and Burchell ranks with the very best. His long experience as Minister of Education for Jamaica and his more recent experience of diplomacy as his country’s High Commissioner in London make him a perfect fit for COL, but it is also his wisdom, his good humour and his beautiful command of the English language that have made him such a joy to work with.

So I close by thanking you all, and through you COL’s many partners around the globe, for making the presidency of COL such a fulfilling and enjoyable experience. I hope you have a good Board meeting tomorrow, I look for COL’s continuing success and I offer my warmest wishes to Asha as she takes over the leadership of this splendid little organization!