Greetings from the Commonwealth of Learning in Vancouver, Canada.

I start my brief address with an apology – due to prior commitments that could not be changed, neither the Commonwealth of Learning’s President Professor Asha Kanwar nor I are able to be physically present at this important regional Forum. We opted to use technology to send you this message and I hope this illustrates COL’s commitment to the TVET Forum.

The Pacific island nations, like most countries in the world, have social, economic and environmental challenges that need to be addressed. These challenges, if not solved, could result in severe social and economic problems.
So – the economic challenges are immense. And the social implications of these are perhaps even more disastrous to contemplate. While many of the Pacific Island countries experience positive growth, the critical questions remain:

- How do we reach the poor and ensure that they benefit from any economic growth?
- How do we ensure that economic growth and development contributes to social development, especially supporting the youth in our countries to gain access to decent jobs?

This is the challenge that we face globally and one that I believe can be addressed with appropriate economic and industrial policies, sound environmental policies, infrastructure and business development and education and training.

Education and training – is the critical platform for any social and economic development.

We know the Pacific region is doing well in terms of increased access to basic education. The Education for All Global Monitoring Report for last year records that regionally, over the last decade, the fastest growth in gross enrolment rates for primary education were seen in the Pacific and East Asia. Of course this puts increasing pressure on secondary and post-secondary education and training systems. At COL, we believe that countries will not be able to meet this increased demand through ‘bricks and mortar’ approaches and new models of technology-enhanced education and training are needed.

COL has recognized this, hence our current Three-Year Plan focuses on ‘Learning for Development’. In this Plan, we further identify technical and vocational skills development as one of our 7 key initiatives. A key component of this is the need to develop Open Educational Resources that support skills training. And, in addition, we have other initiatives that also have a skills focus, such as the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, Open Schools and Teacher Education. I know that many of the countries and institutions present today participate in these activities as well.

Therefore technical and vocational education and training or TVET focuses on the development of skills and is defined as the ‘acquisition of knowledge and skills for the world of work – the practical competencies, know-how, and attitudes necessary to perform a trade or occupation in the labour market’. This definition is from the Asian Development Bank report on ‘Good Practice in Technical and Vocational Education and Training’.

Therefore training, both formal and non-formal, is the source of skills acquisition.

It is important to recognize that training needs are constantly changing as the economy changes, different enterprises - large, small and micro – are established and the labour market changes. We need to be able to conduct an analysis of the labour market, current trends, and countries’ plans for future development of business areas so as to have the necessary skills available to support new enterprises or the expansion of existing ones.

This requires the TVET system to be flexible.
Stakeholders have identified two main reasons for this focus on skills development. These are to raise productivity and to reduce poverty. In focusing on this, there is recognition that if productivity increases, there is likely to be better economic growth. If there is a rise in productivity and economic growth, it will have implications for an increase in jobs being created.

Therefore skills in the workforce will enable a more skilled individual and a competitive corporation and country.

While TVET is critical to serving the youth, there are other sectors of society that also benefit – workers, women, disabled, unemployed, migrants and displaced people. Each group has their own characteristics, context and constraints. These influence the routes to acquire skills – be it through public institutions, NGOs, private providers or work-place based training. Such training can take the form of both formal and non-formal courses and would need to address the formal and informal economies.

In the Pacific, the informal economic sector is the dominant segment of the labour market in most island countries and is where most school-leavers will have to find work. Therefore training for the informal sector should be an important part of any TVET system. This means sufficient new resources should be allocated for training, training strategies designed, and capacity built to support the rural and informal sectors, in part by boosting the technical expertise and delivery capacity of non-government and public organizations.

It is with this understanding that COL has engaged with local organizations and ministries of education and labour to convene this Forum. The Forum will enable us to understand the economic and social challenges and priorities more fully, understand the role of open, distance and flexible learning, the role of technology and work out how we can collaborate to build a more skilled and modern workforce in the Pacific Islands.

I want to commend the countries that are participating in this Forum for taking the step to using technology, distance and flexible learning methodologies and collaborating – this Forum is that first step. The key to the success of this Forum will be what takes place afterwards.

- What do we do when we return back to our countries and institutions?
- How do we take the various strategies forward?
- How do we ensure that we put in place programs that make a difference to the skills of our people, especially the youth and women in our countries?

I leave you with this challenge.

Best wishes with your deliberations over the next few days. Be assured of COL’s support as we strive to build a more prosperous country and region for all.