I would like to extend a very warm welcome to all participants to this Fifth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning.

I would like to extend my thanks to our co-hosts: on the one hand the University of London; and on the other the Commonwealth of Learning, the Commonwealth Secretariat's fellow intergovernmental organisation, and our key partner in delivering our mandate on education.

I am also honoured to be sharing a platform with the Prime Minister of Uganda and the Assistant Director of UNESCO.

This may be the fifth PCF in 9 years - but it's my first. I have been a little over 3 months in my new role as Commonwealth Secretary-General. For me, it represents a wonderful opportunity to engage in an area which I consider pivotal for the future we are building for ourselves and thus for the Commonwealth. Our primary focus in this role is on those who will inherit and inhabit this century, and those who will have to deal with the legacy - often the wretched legacy - of what people of my age have left behind them. Let us not fail them in equipping them as best we can.

I believe strongly in young people. The effects of globalisation, positive and negative, flow above all through young people. If today's challenges are to be met, it is by them, and if any enlightened knowledge society is to be created, it will be created through them. Sidelined for so long, young people are now beginning to be seen as sources of wisdom and direction. They need a voice in our national and local government, beyond the voice they have in our national culture. And yet the voice is so often muted; and young people - with all their eager energy and potential - are too often driven into the sand of unemployment, or marginalization.

I also believe strongly in the cause of women, and have often said that their fortunes - their wellbeing, their education, their voice, their capacity to make a living - are the real litmus test as to the health of a society. Few investments in the development of society can match the returns of educating its girls.
I also believe strongly in education: education holds the key to the universal advancement of human society: to political and social stability, to economic growth and development goals, to respect and harmony between the sexes, and between different faiths, ethnic groups and communities. It is the key to literally billions of unique human beings fulfilling their unique potential.

So my belief and advocacy for the themes of young people, women and education means that I am in the right place today standing here at this podium. My vision for the Commonwealth is that we continue to focus on Democracy and Development - you can alliterate that slightly differently to Governance and Growth - and that we do so by using our global networks, which already reach so far and which can reach further if we continue to build strategic alliances with those bodies - some governmental, some private sector, some civil society - which can further our aims.

So I do thank you for this invitation, and I applaud our hosts for this exceptional achievement in bringing together so many people from all over the Commonwealth. I thank them; and I thank you all for coming.

We meet on the anniversary of Bastille Day - and it is with accompanying thoughts of liberty, equality and fraternity that I recall that this is also a time of anniversaries for Commonwealth education.

Next year sees important anniversaries of two enduring features of the Commonwealth education landscape. When the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers takes place in Kuala Lumpur in June next year to address the theme of "Towards and Beyond Global Goals and Targets", it will be 50 years since the first such meeting in Oxford in 1959.

That same Oxford conference also saw the establishment of the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, whose fiftieth anniversary will be marked by the establishment of an endowment fund to ensure it approaches the next half-century with renewed strength. 30,000 CSFP alumni - not to mention the numberless people whose lives they have touched - will attest to the potential and reach of that scheme. Our challenge now is to keep it fresh - traditional South to North scholarships can also become South-to-South, and North to South.

2008, remarkably, also marks no less than 150 years since our co-hosts the University of London first provided qualifications through external study, creating the basis for the now thriving open and distance learning sector. To Sir Graeme Davies and all at the University, my congratulations.

Meanwhile there are other, 'shorter' anniversaries. 20 years ago this year, Commonwealth Heads of Government recognised the importance of Open and Distance Learning, and the need to harness technology for learning and development, when, in a far sighted decision, they established the Commonwealth of Learning.

And then 5 years ago, Commonwealth Education Ministers further recognised the value of open and distance learning in overcoming geographical barriers when they made it a priority area for Commonwealth action, when they met in Edinburgh.

These anniversaries are a time to take stock. We give credit where it is due, and I pay particular tribute to my colleagues in the Commonwealth of Learning. Some of their work is truly ground-breaking, and
nowhere is it better appreciated than in the 26 of our 53 Commonwealth Member Countries which have tiny and often remote populations of less than one million people. Just look at the Virtual University for the Small States of the Commonwealth, which goes from strength to strength. This $3 million project - facilitated by COL with seed funding from the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation - is a mechanism to help small states work together to produce, adapt and use courses and learning materials that would be difficult for one state to produce alone. Meanwhile I commend the CoL for its valuable teacher-training work in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as for developing 'virtual classroom technology' - computers in traveling vans, in simpler terms - for use across the Commonwealth.

At anniversaries, we also look forward, and that can be very disturbing. How do we marry the grandeur of our vision for education, with the reality?

Of the 115 million children worldwide who don't go to school, 70 million are in the Commonwealth - 30 or so million out of primary education, and 40 million out of secondary education. Worse still, of the 65 million girls out of primary school worldwide, 40 million are in the Commonwealth. From the limited statistics available, we know that 9 Commonwealth countries have a pupil/teacher ratio of above 40:1 - in some sub-Saharan countries it reaches 70:1. Look further at two related facts - that 60% of global HIV/AIDS cases are in our Commonwealth and that most of those are in the 15-24 age bracket, and that well over half of our 1.8 billion people are under the age of 25 - and you most certainly get the picture that most of the world's challenges in the field of young people and education are in the Commonwealth.

Let me add further dark strokes to this picture, by mentioning the Millennium Development Goals, in whose creation I was involved. Yes, there has been massive progress on the two education-related Goals - that all children should go through primary school, and that there should be equal numbers of girls as of boys in school. Yet when last we researched this, 18 Commonwealth countries (for which data is available) are markedly off track to achieve Universal Primary Education by 2015, and five of these have more than a quarter of their primary school age population out of school. Just 19 of the 53 Commonwealth countries had reached gender parity at both primary and secondary levels in 2005.

And where there have been momentous moves towards UPE (above all through the removal of school fees) this has exposed other challenges: a dearth in the quantity and quality of teachers, the need for curriculum reform, and a shortage of teaching materials, an area which COL is working to address through the development and sharing of Open Educational Resources. More primary school children, in turn, creates a "tidal wave" of children wanting to head towards secondary schooling. 'Less is more', they say: and in this case, there are those who voice the logical opposite, that 'more may be less'.

These are some of the challenges and priorities to which we bring the concept of Open and Distance Learning, or ODL. We don't study the means of ODL - let others discuss how the technology of ODL does or doesn't work ... - but we study the results of ODL, and the ways it can contribute to your conference theme of "Access to Learning for Development".

Each of us will have our different experiences of what ODL can do. I found myself talking enthusiastically about it in Rome recently at the UN summit on food security. The Commonwealth response to the food security problem is, very simply, that we need to increase agricultural production -
and I was able to tell Heads of Government about a very impressive Commonwealth of Learning project called Lifelong Learning for Farmers. It's an experimental programme that began in India, using IT kiosks set up in villages. It creates groupings of local farmers, and gets them to think communally about what their challenges are. Then it mobilises people like local universities and agricultural colleges, who can provide information and advice via the internet. Then it helps to market the farmers goods, and acts as a broker with funding sources like banks. All this, at minimal expense with maximal returns - this is ODL at its very relevant and very practical best. The Indian model is now being tried in Africa. It is the embodiment of our theme of "Access to Learning for Development".

Increasingly, we see ODL at play in the Commonwealth. We are now home to several so-called Mega Universities of more than 100,000 students, such as the Allama Iqbal University in Pakistan, the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, the UK's Open University, and the University of South Africa.

But with the prevalence of ODL, come new questions:

- How can we use examples from around the Commonwealth to learn how to maximize the impact of ODL on people's livelihoods, in agriculture, fishing and small enterprise?

- How can we increase the effective application of ODL beyond tertiary and vocational learning? Can the potential shown by Open Schools, in India and Namibia for instance, be scaled up to meet the increasing demand for secondary schooling?

- Or how best can we continue to use ODL to improve teacher training, to fill the gaps in the quantity and quality of primary school teachers needed to meet the MDGs, estimated at 4 million for Africa alone?

- How do we harness the benefits of ODL, its ability to reach more people, especially the marginalized, and to empower the learner with independence and initiative, while maintaining the balance with human interface, and with it the real capacity for relationship and mentoring?

- How do we ensure quality in ODL, especially in the context of the rapid development of eLearning and Open Educational Resources? How do we prevent the emerging threat of unscrupulous "degree mills" undermining reputable providers of ODL?

- In the arena of health, what lessons are there in the use of ODL to help tackle HIV/AIDS, and in providing education and training to health professionals and communities?

- How can ODL teach some of the values at the heart of our societies, especially respect and understanding between people of different faith, ethnicity, language and community - a Commonwealth priority, in which the CoL can help us?

- How can we apply ODL for creative applications adapted to all forms of learning? We hear from all sides that we live in an expanding knowledge society. Innovative application of technology can create the means to address the stupendous challenges of education which - as I said at the beginning - hold the key to our future.
These, and more, will be the subject of your discussions these next few days, and I wish you well in them. I shall follow them with keen interest, and I will be in close contact with the Commonwealth of Learning as they embark on a new three-year action plan designed to put some of these ideas into practice.

We are living in a fast-paced world - our needs move fast, our technological solutions move fast, and education has to move with them. Some things don't change, though. Our values, for a start, and our Commonwealth approach to using our networks to share the things we do best, and to bring them to as many people as possible. That is the essence of Open and Distance Learning; and that is the essence of providing Access to Learning for Development.

Thank you.