Good day to you all. It is a pleasure to make some introductory comments by video to this important meeting on the Open Educational Resource University.

Openness in higher education is close to my heart. Next year it will be forty years since I re-oriented my career and committed to the open education movement by joining Québec’s Télé-université, where we opened up higher education by providing distance learning over the vast territory of Québec.

I then moved to Athabasca University in Alberta where we opened higher education up further by introducing the first degree programme in Canada with no residency requirement – meaning that if you had acquired the necessary credits by study in other institutions, Athabasca would award you a degree without requiring you to take any of its own courses.

We also – it seems a small thing today but was radical in the 1970s – were the first university to allow students to pay their fees using VISA and other credit cards. And we also allowed enrolment every month, which was another new concept in public higher education although well-established in the commercial sector.

Later I served as president of the International Council for Distance Education just after we had changed the name from the International Council for Correspondence Education. The word ‘open’ was inserted into the title a few years later.

Then for the whole of the 1990s I had the immense privilege of leading the world’s most iconic standard bearer for open higher education, the UK Open University. So the brief advice I shall give you is based on four decades of experience of open education as a practitioner and observer.

I start with a simple engineering analogy. If a structure is too rigid it will break under stress, but if it is too flexible it will collapse under stress. Engineers therefore seek toughness: structures that will bend without breaking when you put stress on them. I recommend toughness as a principle for designing open education. You are trying to make education more flexible but the system must to tough enough to withstand pressures of various kinds.
My second point is from Walter Perry, the founding head of the UK Open University. His book, simply called *The Open University*, should still be required reading for anyone promoting open education.

Lord Perry’s key point was that if an institution wants to be credible it should not innovate on two many dimensions at once. The UKOU had abolished academic admission requirements, built a massive multi-media distance education system and moved the academic year to the calendar year.

Perry thought that those changes were enough for the students and public to digest for starters. He therefore made the OU relatively traditional in matters of curriculum and assessment, but ensured that it did them much better than other institutions. Indeed, Perry’s prime personal motivation in founding the Open University was not so much to introduce technology or to serve adults students, but to use the course team approach to improve what he considered to be the lamentable standard of teaching in British universities.

At the same time, in the early 1970s on the other side of the Atlantic, Ernie Boyer created Empire State College to open up higher education on another dimension. Even in those days most people seeking higher education in the US could find somewhere to study. Admission was not a problem but Boyer felt the higher education curriculum was rigid and fossilised. Empire State College opened up the curriculum so that students could design their own course of study. But – and this is very important – the resulting degree had all the authority and credibility of the State University of New York behind it.

So my central message to you today, as you think of how to open up higher education further using open educational resources and all the new technologies, is to remember that students want credible credentials. I imagine that all of you have credible credentials and that some of you, particularly the Americans, give that touching demonstration of insecurity by proudly writing PhD after your name when you sign letters. If any of you have credentials from degree mills I invite you to talk about the experience candidly during the meeting!

As you try to design more open and flexible arrangements for examination, certification and accreditation, remember that people want what you have: credible credentials. The public is conservative when it comes to education and the idea of the do-it-yourself university is fine for independent study but not for certification that the public will take seriously.

Martin Bean, the current vice-chancellor of the UKOU, expresses our purpose well when he says that we should use technology to lead those who are interested out of the vast cloud of informal learning and put them on the path to formal study. The UKOU is doing this brilliantly and has tracked the way that 28 million downloads from its iTunes collection (80% from outside the UK; 11 million users of its OpenLearn website; and 210 million viewers who watched OU/BBC TV programmes (just in the last year), led to 6,000 students enrolling in OU courses for credit.

Your challenge is to provide other routes of the same kind from informal to formal study and I wish you well. My final point is to remind you that while there are new technologies there are few new principles.

One hundred and fifty years ago London University launched its external degree programme, for people all over the world, on the radical principle that it didn’t care how you acquired the knowledge provided
you could pass the exam. That programme, which has produced five Nobel laureates over the years, demonstrates the two key principles that I recommend to you.

First, give the students every possible element of flexibility in drawing on the rich environment of knowledge in their learning. But, second, make sure that you offer them routes to credible certification so that they and society can have confidence in the robustness of their knowledge and skills.

Have a good meeting. Thank you for inviting me to talk to you.