Salutations!

I am pleased to be here at this meeting and to share with you some thoughts as well as experiences that we have been gradually gathering over the last 30 years in practicing open and distance learning (ODL), especially in the context of developing economies. The practice itself is not new to many of you and I daresay that a few of you at least might even have experienced some form of distance education in your youth.

The organisers of this session invited me to draw your attention to the role of ODL is playing a role in the educational strategies of developing nations. I aim to do this by first drawing your attention to what is being accomplished in a number of developing countries, secondly, to highlight some of the challenges that confront the system and finally, to once again draw your attention to a few policy issues that have either contributed to the success of these systems or factors that may have impeded their progress.

Despite abysmal resources, unclear policy support, inadequate supply of instructional talent, insufficient administrative experience and poor communication infrastructure, distance education has grown at a remarkable rate in many parts of the developing world. There are many reasons for this growth but none is as compelling as the desire for learning by the tens of thousands of individuals for many reasons. Those who championed the cause of open and distance learning in the sixties and seventies did so because of their strong belief that this way of delivering education would increase access many fold while maintaining costs at manageable levels. They also believed that distance education supported the desire for achieving greater equity and equality of opportunities to access learning. These efforts have resulted in the creation of some of the biggest open universities in the developing world such as the Telesecundria in
Mexico, Sukhothai Thamathirat Open University (STOU), Thailand, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), India, China's Central Radio and TV University (CRTVU), the University of South Africa (UNISA), the Open University of Tanzania, the National Open School in India and Nigeria's National Teachers' Institute.

The annual enrolments of these Universities run in the hundreds of thousands, for instance, IGNOU registers between 150-200,000 students annually, the CRTVU in excess of 150,000 students and STOU and others between 50,000 and 100,000 annually. Apart from these dedicated systems, there are also the external studies or off-campus departments of many universities in these jurisdictions that have taken education beyond campus walls. In fact, in some countries, such as India and Malaysia, and in the South Pacific and the Caribbean, there are more distance education students in the conventional institutions than in dedicated single-mode ODL ones. Just like their counterparts in the developed world, these distance education institutions have done well in some aspects and not so well in others.

Collectively, these institutions have indeed increased access to learning. They also seemed to have brought down costs and perhaps, unintentionally, may also have taken the first steps in placing the learner at the centre of the educational transaction. While all of them have relied on print as their principal media, some have used broadcast technologies with some success and a few others have begun experimenting with digitally driven multi-media to enrich their curriculum. The exploration of the learning technologies by distance educators has also had some positive impact on teaching in the non-distance education institutions. Above all, distance education ventures seemed to have proved that many individuals in our societies, regardless of the extent of prior learning, are perfectly capable of self-directed learning at higher levels of education and training if only the instruction were designed sensitively and sensibly, respecting the learner and supporting him or her in the learning process.

Despite these successes, there have been some disappointments as well. These range from a failure by many institutions to penetrate large parts of their community that are non-urban. Apart from this failure to serve the seriously marginalized parts of their community, the failure also to ensure quality of design, product development and delivery and support services have contributed to serious negativism about the value of distance education in many parts of the developing world. Very often, the most significant factor contributing to poor quality is the low level of resources invested in distance education. Shoestring budgets by governments or autonomous institutions, absence of training and staff development, minimal investment in course development, uncertain policies for recognition of credits, demands made by intellectual property rights conventions, lip service to technological infrastructure, study-centre development and an unacceptable level of insensitivity to learner support systems have all had terrible consequences in terms of the public's disdain for distance education. The bad memories of commercially-driven correspondence schools, even after 30 years of the founding of the great open universities, have but exacerbated this negativism.

In spite of these difficulties, there is every reason to consider the use of distance education as a serious strategy in confronting the challenges that developing countries face in meeting the targets of the Millennium Development Goals. The still undiminished demand for learning at all levels, the desire to improve the quality of our teachers in classrooms by retraining millions of them, the need to take non-
formal and basic education to rural and marginalized parts of our countries, to promote greater participation by women in education and training, provide training for millions of out-of-school youth and make available flexible learning opportunities for continuing professional development for managers, health workers, agricultural workers, doctors, academics, and many other professions all require new and flexible provisions for learning. Even more importantly is the increasing recognition and acceptance that education may be the only way to ensure sustainability of communities and nations as healthy, vibrant and functioning societies and democracies, and for individuals to escape from the viciousness of poverty. However, for open and distance learning to be of value, Ministers may have to take note of, and be sensitive to, a number of issues and needs. Let me briefly highlight a few for you and perhaps my other panellists may pick some of these in their presentations:

Policy framework: There is a need for a clearly enunciated policy on open and distance learning by governments, especially on matters such as recognition of qualification obtained by learners through this means; inclusion of funding provisions under the Sector Wide Approaches (SWAPs) or any other internationally financed development; clear expressions of quality of the learning environment, support for learners, bridging programmes for those without prior learning experience. In the Commonwealth, India and South Africa stand out for their farsightedness in having such a policy framework and, indeed, in these two countries ODL is growing into a significant contributor to educational provision.

A need for unequivocal institutional commitment: especially in conventional institutions that take on off-campus education as an added provision then fail to provide the required resources needed for this facility to progress in a sustainable manner. An absence of institutional commitment leads to all kinds of bad practice from poor quality course materials to the absence of learner support and a total neglect of the students outside the campus.

Investment in staff training: Organising and running an ODL programme require staff skilled in a variety of tasks. Both academic and non-academic staff requires serious training. The current level of investment in staff development is totally inadequate for the tasks expected from teachers requested to create self-instructional materials. The range of skills required to function in a multi-media environment is even more demanding. Institutions are quite enthusiastic about investing in new appliances, software programmes and connections, but totally unrealistic when it comes to investing in training.

Preventing commercialisation: The commercial nature of ventures, especially from current fronts, is beginning to cause considerable concern among many who wish to see a growth in distance education provision. While profit per se is not an ugly word at all; insensitive brand waving, crassly marketing education, as yet another commodity, will hurt the cause of distance education if it turns out that profit is the only reason driving such an educational delivery system. Academic qualification, at the blink of an eye, harks back to the days of commercial correspondence education which suffered a bad image, in the past, in the minds of both mainstream academics and the public.

A clear purpose for applying the new technologies: While on the one hand, the new technologies have the capacity to help confront the current challenges, the question on the other, even in the past, has never been about technological capability or versatility. The challenges had more to do with access to the
technology, lack of skills to use the technology for teaching and learning, and the cost of buying and renewing the technologies at both ends of the equation. These will continue to be the main impediments to the serious application of technologies for a much longer period than devotees of a technological solution are willing to accept. Universities in the developed world are already learning some hard lessons that the hype on technology is not necessarily reflective of ground reality and, yet, in many quarters, developing countries educational planners are being urged to follow the technology path regardless of ground reality. Besides a lack of human capability to use these new technologies, the inability of many governments in the developing world to build the necessary physical infrastructures in a sustainable manner does not support an over enthusiasm for a technological solution.

Shifting costs away from institutions to individual learners: New approaches to delivering distance education on the backbone of cyber pipes have also meant that the cost of learning is gradually shifting from being an institutional responsibility to that of a learner's responsibility. Connectivity costs, line charges, appliance and software costs will all have to be borne by learners. Not many home learners have the level of disposable income to pay for these in addition to tuition and other institutional fees. If providers of education are not mindful, yet another barrier can emerge.

Untested leadership to manage change: Distance education requires sound management and leadership. The early pioneers in the field were academically respected, politically connected and astute, charismatic speakers and interlocutors, clever strategists and tacticians. They did not just manage; they initiated change. Managing change more than any other requirement will be the acid test for leadership in the future. As the environment for distance education changes, there will be mounting pressure on institutions to respond to this change. Leaders with a capacity to manage the rapid rate at which change takes place must be found and empowered.

Continuous vigilance to ensure equity and equality of opportunities: At the heart of educational innovations, such as open and distance learning, must be the concern to reach out to those in our communities who were never able to participate in any form of learning. Driven by the desire to touch that last person in the queue, distance educators must go to extraordinary lengths to ensure equity issues are at the centre of the debate. Similarly, there also has to be serious attempts at ensuring that equality of is made available in as far as it were possible within resource constraints. I do not see much of this debate any longer, as too many of us rush to embrace the technologies and the market. We do need to continuously keep this debate alive.