Esteemed Ministers of Education in the Caribbean countries, colleagues of Caribbean Examination Council, CARICOM, and dignitaries attending the meeting, I present our best compliments to you on behalf of the Commonwealth of Learning and our President and CEO, Professor Asha Kanwar. I am humbled by the nomination to present before you some ideas related to the topic of your meeting on ‘Flexible Learning in a digital age’, and I have decided to give a focus on micro-credential based on my discussion with Dr Eduardo Ali.

The Commonwealth of Learning was established in 1987 by the Commonwealth Heads of Governments to help Commonwealth governments and institutions use technologies to improve and expand access to education and training.

In the Caribbean region, we work in the 12 Commonwealth countries, and thank you, Ministers, for your support.

Our work focuses on promoting learning for sustainable development, where we believe that learning must lead to economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental conservation.

In this presentation, I provide an overview of the digital environment, discuss flexible learning, and elaborate on understanding micro-credential as a path for promoting lifelong learning.

First, digital age context. What is the current scenario of access to digital technologies?

Caribbean countries present a very positive outlook in terms of access to Internet, with many countries having over 70% access. According to the available data Guyana has the lowest access per hundred at 37, followed by Belize at 51.

Data on mobile subscription too is very positive, with Antigua and Barbuda having almost 2 mobiles per person. The access to mobile smartphone and Internet shows that digital learning via mobile could be a possible strategy to reach more people access quality lifelong learning.

People not in school and employment in the Caribbean is a big number. According to International Labour Organization data from 2019 and 2020, due to limited education and employment
opportunities, about three out of every ten young people in the Caribbean are not in school, employed, or being trained.

During the Covid-19 the problem of skills shortage increased with many not attending schools. COL admitted over 150,000 citizens of the Commonwealth to develop skills to regain employment; more than 42,000 of them completed the training. Many of them were from the Caribbean countries.

Teachers faced many challenges due to sudden transition to online learning. COL in collaboration with the Ministry of Education in Trinidad and Tobago conducted a massive open online course on Open Educational Resources for Online Learning reaching over 18,000 teachers.

The pandemic also highlighted the preparedness in terms of ICT in education at the level of ministries and educational institutions. While most Caribbean countries have relevant policies in place, it may be time to review these. COL supported Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, and Saint Lucia to develop their ICT in education policy and strategy prior to the pandemic.

COL also supported these three countries to adopt the Commonwealth Digital Education Leadership Training in Action (C-Delta) to provide digital education skills training to teachers and secondary school students to effectively use digital resources, assist them recognize their digital footprints and digital identity for online safety, and engage in personal learning network. C-Delta is a scalable online platform.

The key trend in the region indicates high Internet and mobile penetration creating new opportunities for online and blended learning. There is increased use and acceptance of online learning during Covid-19, and more open and free courses for teacher training are available. There is need for skilling and re-skilling the youths, and review of ICT in education policies is needed to build resilience of education systems.

In the Caribbean region, despite high penetration of Internet and mobile and several online projects, there are five key challenges which includes Internet connectivity at schools, Internet access beyond administration in schools, connectivity at home, cost of Internet access, and teacher training.

A report of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean indicated that “blended learning will characterize post-pandemic education in the Caribbean, with a combination of online and traditional classroom learning for maximum inclusivity. Beyond the pandemic, flexible, dynamic education systems with in-built preparedness for large-scale crises can offer learning continuity in the face of extreme weather events frequently experienced by Caribbean SIDS.”

According to Australian Flexible Learning Framework, flexible learning expands choice on what, when, where and how people learn.

In practice flexible learning could manifest in different ways, including synchronous and asynchronous learning, blended and online learning. Duration of learning hours is insignificant, as along as learning outcomes are achieved and student experience mastery learning. Flexible learning is also open to work-place based learning, providing more work integrated and lifelong learning.
opportunities. It may also include recognition of prior learning and provide credits to learning through experience.

Over 20 years back, Jim Taylor talked about flexible learning model and intelligent flexible learning. Distance education provided flexibility in terms of time, place, and pace. But as synchronous delivery mechanism such as broadcast came into picture flexibility was lost. The Internet provides us the opportunity to deliver better interactive asynchronous learning that is flexible. New developments in AI and big data helps us create the Gen 5 learning environment providing personalized learning.

Earlier the learning environment was either classroom-based or online/distance education. However, there is convergence happening, and more institutions around the world are now adopting a blended approach, which is a judicious mix of face-to-face and online teaching and learning.

Technology is the backbone of such a blended learning environment, and policymakers must ensure access to digital tools that are affordable and there is equity and inclusion in policy as well as practice. Teacher training as well as student preparation to effectively develop skills of self-directed learning would help designing and delivering quality blended learning.

In designing blended and online learning environment or for that matter any learning environment, it is good to start with assessment in mind. There is a need to focus more on continuous assessment than final year-end examination. Assessment should be authentic, and criterion oriented to provide evidence of learning.

As assessment forms the basis of any system of education, there is a need also to rethink new ways of certifying the learners. Micro-credential is one such development that needs consideration of policymakers.

These days, there are many news items indicating that leading companies in the world are not looking for degrees, but they are seeking skills from the applicants while recruiting staff. But can degree be really delinked from jobs?

Google, for example, has developed a training programme that prepares job-ready graduates. Should we adopt this model for all courses and programmes?

Traditional degree signal that the graduates are employable. However, this is increasingly being questioned as a proxy for employability. Caplan argues that the primary function of education is not to enhance students' skills but to certify their competencies that are valued by employers. If that is so, how can we ensure our education system provides robust information about the competencies of the learners.

This would require a better understanding about micro-credentials as a growing field. A recent effort by UNESCO resulted in a draft definition that lacks consensus; it is also not endorsed by UNESCO. It says, “a micro-credential is a record of focused learning achievement verifying what the learner knows, understands or can do; includes assessment based on clearly defined standards and is awarded by a trusted provider; has stand-alone value and may also contribute to or complement
other micro-credentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning; and meets the standards required by relevant quality assurance.”

In Australia, micro-credentials are outcome based; they are responsive to industry-needs, and tailor towards supporting lifelong learning. Micro-credentials are at least one hour and less than an AQF award qualification in duration.

In Canada, micro-credential is in early stages of development. There is no limit to duration, though in British Columbia, it is recommended below 288 hours. However, the idea of micro-credential follows some principles such as relevance to industry/community needs, accreditation by a recognised and professional agency, meeting government-set quality standard, follow assessment to help the learner demonstrate skills and knowledge, offered in a flexible approach and are stackable to combine previously earned credentials.

New Zealand has more matured micro-credential regime, where approved courses are registered in the NZQF micro-credential equivalency register. The micro-credentials are 5-40 credit courses/training (where 1 credit is 10 hours of student learning time). These focus on updating skills and provide continuing professional development opportunities.

To design micro-credential, it is important to have clarity on the basic framework which must be aligned to national/regional qualifications framework. Such courses must be competency-based, industry-oriented, bite-sized, assessed (including assessment of prior-learning), and remain modality neutral (could be in any mode – blended, online, face-to-face and hybrid). The quality assurance of the courses and providers of the micro-credential courses also must be carefully considered and regulated.

Finally, I would propose that for creating a more flexible learning environment in the Caribbean countries, there is a need for a micro-credential framework, a federated registry of micro-credential, and local capacities must be developed to offer relevant micro-credentials. Such steps would help learners find their relevant micro-courses and enable providers to develop the much-needed competency-based courses.

Thank you for your attention.