

Honourable Minister, the Honourable Burchell Whiteman, Prof Vincent Tenebe, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the seventh Pan Commonwealth Forum. I am delighted that the Chairman of our Board of Governors, the Honourable Burchell Whiteman and other members of the Board, Ambassador Miriam Katagum, Dame Carol Kidu and Prof Narend Bajjnath are with us today. Many of my distinguished COL colleagues are also here while other members of our Team are holding the fort in Vancouver. Each one of them has worked cheerfully and with great commitment to ensure the success of this event.

These forums are organized with local partners and I must express my sincere thanks to the Federal Ministry of Education, our gracious hosts and our partner the National Open University of Nigeria. Prof Vincent Tenebe, has taken personal interest in planning this PCF and his team, particularly the Local Organising Committee, headed by Prof Mba Okoronkwo have devoted considerable time and energy to making this a particularly fruitful and rewarding collaboration.

The PCFs are held in different parts of the Commonwealth. The first was held in Brunei, followed by those held in South Africa, New Zealand, Jamaica; UK and India. After travelling round the Commonwealth, PCF has returned to the heart of Africa.

This is a very special PCF as for the first time, it is being inaugurated by the President of a great Commonwealth country. And perhaps this is appropriate as COL celebrates its twenty fifth anniversary this year. Commonwealth Heads of Government established COL, when they met in Vancouver, Canada, in 1987, which has been our home ever since. Canada, our host country is one of our major donors as are the UK, India, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and our hosts, Nigeria.

Your Excellency, we are very grateful for the financial and intellectual support provided by your government. We also appreciate our partnership with several institutions in Nigeria. COL has supported the establishment of a Regional Centre for Research and Training in Distance and Open Learning for West Africa at NOUN. This has become a hub for training activities related to open and distance learning in the region.

As more governments around the Commonwealth accelerate efforts to increase access to education, and training, open and distance learning is increasingly becoming a viable option that can help address issues of access, quality, costs and equity. Nigeria has a long tradition of leadership in open and distance learning. It has much to share with the rest of the world. The participants representing 50 countries bring their own unique experiences and will take away many new ones from this confluence of ideas around the main theme of this forum 'Open and Distance Learning for Development: towards empowerment and transformation'. These conferences have a very close link with COL's own work, which explores how learning can lead to more effective development.

Let me welcome you, once again to this seventh PCF and thank our hosts, the Federal Ministry of Education, our partners NOUN and all the sponsors, international and local who have contributed generously to making this event possible. I hope that your time here will be both productive and memorable and that you will leave more empowered after the exciting deliberations and return home eager to transform your environments.