Opening Remarks by the Campus Principal

Commonwealth of Learning Stakeholder Forum

November 24, 2009

“From Open School to Open University”

Salutations

- Mrs. Margaret Richardson, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education (MSTTE)
- His Excellency The Honourable Burchell Whiteman OJ, Chairman, Board of Governors, Commonwealth of Learning
- Sir John Daniel, President and CEO of the Commonwealth of Learning
- Mr. Paul West, Director, knowledge Management & Information Technology, Commonwealth of Learning
- Ms Karen Rosemin, Director, Distance Learning Secretariat, MSTTE and COL Focal Point for Trinidad and Tobago
- Ms. Jennifer Sampson, Senior Advisor to the President, University of Trinidad and Tobago
- Members of Campus Management and members of staff of the UWI St. Augustine Campus
- Distinguished Guests
- Members of the Media

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- It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to Trinidad and Tobago and most certainly, to the St. Augustine Campus of The University of the West Indies. Today, I wear two of my many hats – firstly, as Principal of this lovely St. Augustine Campus that for those of you who are coming here for the first time, is one of the four Campuses of The University of the West Indies, which recently celebrated its 60th anniversary. It is a Campus with over 17,000 students, 3,000 staff members, 5 Faculties, namely – Engineering, Humanities & Education, Medical Sciences, Science and Agriculture and Social Sciences, and next year, the St. Augustine Campus will be celebrating its golden 50th anniversary! This is a much anticipated milestone and we are looking forward to commemorating the achievements of our Campus.

- The “other hat” I wear today is that of a committed Board member for the Commonwealth of Learning, an organization dedicated to innovative approaches to quality education and to developing learning systems and knowledge networks in support of countries’ development goals.
The hosting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Trinidad and Tobago on November 27th-29th has provided us with the opportunity to engage in a discussion on practical proposals for fostering teaching and learning in the service of development, particularly in a challenging global financial environment. The seamless progression from open school to open university could very well be a viable approach for overcoming challenges with access, infrastructure, facilities, etc., faced by many countries.

Given the global economic slowdown over the past year or so, today’s forum is even more timely since governments in all regions of the world, are exploring ways of achieving the Millennium Development Goals with fewer available resources. Today’s dialogue among key COL stakeholders could help develop an appropriate response while also addressing people’s needs to adjust to change and to enhance knowledge and skills by expanding opportunities for education, training and learning.

Without a doubt, there is significant demand for greater diversification in learning practices. This is particularly evident in places where the supply of school infrastructure, teachers and teacher trainers has not kept pace with the growing demand for post-primary school education.
It is in this light that today’s forum on the topic “From Open School to Open University” is quite relevant. By actively promoting the use of Open and Distance Learning for development in areas outside formal education, we can help countries achieve the transition “from bricks to clicks” whereby prior physical and capacity constraints are eroded by the availability of educational programmes and information at the click of a button.

In this regard, the Commonwealth of Learning can boast of several success stories in countries across the globe - India, Jamaica, Sub-Saharan Africa, Solomon Islands, and Malawi, just to name a few. Not to mention the many benefits derived from Open and Distance Learning, such as flexible learning, increased access to basic and secondary schooling and cost effective solutions for large scale delivery by using advanced technologies.

An innovative example of this is the creation of “Wiki Educator” which develops free educational content for planning education projects. Open and Distance Learning also assists in training millions of new teachers, and promotes the sharing of programmes among institutions. Through the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, for example, hundreds of teachers have acquired advanced information and communication technology (ICT) skills.
The benefits of Open and Distance Learning are by no means restricted to the education system, but are also extended to encompass Livelihoods and Health, the second programme sector as indicated by the Commonwealth of Learning’s most recent “Three-Year Plan 2009-2012”. For instance, Lifelong Learning for Farmers is a successful grassroots model for increasing rural prosperity that uses ICT to link banks and universities to village communities to exploit new economic activities.

Open and Distance Learning, however, does have its challenges and institutional difficulties because it involves totally different new skills sets, lengthy materials development, new managerial, administrative and support infrastructure. As the leading regional university, the UWI has dedicated one of its Campuses – the Open Campus – to specialize in the development and delivery of distance programmes with a particular focus on reaching the underserved communities of non-Campus countries in the Caribbean.

As we look ahead, global trends dictate that our educational institutions at all levels must explore keeping current with and incorporating new ICT tools
to help achieve our educational goals, as well as the overall development of our peoples and our countries.

- In closing, let me express my gratitude to you all for coming. I am truly looking forward to an enjoyable and productive forum. We should all seek to ensure that there is follow-up to the discussions, so that ideas and recommendations can be translated into action and in so doing, we each play our part in influencing the policy and practices that shape teaching and learning in our countries and our regions.

- Ladies and Gentlemen, I firmly believe that through close collaboration with all of our stakeholders, we can build increased synergy in our work and maximize the impact of what we do.

- I thank you.