Good morning and a very warm welcome to you all.

A special welcome to the foreign delegates who have travelled from different parts of Southern Africa to attend this high level Conference.

It is indeed an honour and privilege to address such a distinguished gathering of experts.

Today is 5th December 2014 and I am reminded that exactly one year ago, the most distinguished African stalwart, freedom fighter and Nobel Peace Laureate Nelson Mandela left this world for his heavenly abode, and to settle forever in our heart.

It was this illustrious son of the world who once said and I quote:

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. (Unquote)

This message is a reminder that education is not an end itself.

It is the means to empower people to enable them to achieve societal goals and objectives.

Education is not only acquiring qualifications and degrees and build a better society.

Also, it is an excellent tool to help our citizens to lead a better life.
That’s why I would like to thank DEASA for choosing Mauritius as the venue for its 49th Conference.

And I note with immense pleasure that the Open University of Mauritius, which was established recently, only two years ago, has taken the lead in hosting this important event.

In Mauritius, we are lucky that every child is guaranteed a seat in our primary and secondary schools where education is not only offered freely but transportation is also free.

Furthermore, textbooks are provided freely to all children enrolled in primary schools.

Let me stress however, that things were not easy.

In 1961, that is, seven years before Mauritius became an independent nation, a well-known British Professor by the name of Titmuss, who was requested by the Colonial Government to carry out an assessment of the economic and social conditions prevailing in Mauritius had this to say and I quote:

“Frankly, they (meaning all the social and economic challenges) amount to economic, social and political disaster. We would be failing in our duty if we used any other word.” (Unquote)

But time proved Prof. Titmuss wrong.

It is thanks to the vision of the Father of the Nation, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, that Mauritius was transformed from a state as described in the statement of Prof. Titmuss to a socio-economically vibrant society that it is today.

SSR placed education at the heart of the economic and social development of Mauritius, and as he once said:

“Without a healthy, educated and contented nation, it will never be possible to develop the resources of this country.”

SSR always believed that Mauritius would fail to prosper as a nation without the development of its human resource base.

And at a time, when the economy was in difficulty, he decided to make education free for all.

Several people at that time saw that decision as irrational, inappropriate, and wasteful but SSR insisted, and rightly so.

Without free education, Mauritius would not have prospered as a nation, and many of the children from poor families and girls would have been deprived of their fundamental and universal right to education.

There is no magic formula to build a prosperous nation, unless we invest in education, and education, as you know, is priceless.
It is very unfortunate that nearly 38% of African adults (some 153 millions) are still illiterate, and two-thirds of them are women.

Several studies have shown that parental education plays a pivotal role in the education of children.

Parental support helps to motivate learners so that they persist in the system.

The number of school drop-outs or push-outs is also a major cause of concern because studies have revealed that they become criminals.

And as Linda Darling-Hammond, one of the world’s most eloquent, authoritative, compassionate, and prolific voice for equity, social justice, and the transformation of schools, and teacher education has said, “the high rates of incarceration in the US are linked to under-education, race and unemployment”.

“Most US prisons inmates”, she adds, “are high school drop-outs and many are functionally illiterate and have learning disabilities.”

Africa is the only continent where more than half of parents are not able to help their children with homework due to their own illiteracy.

In my opinion, this high level of illiteracy cannot be reversed using the traditional system of education.

We need to use open and distance learning tools that make optimum use of technology and at affordable costs.

If at one time, distance learning was considered to be inferior to the conventional system, today it is not the case.

Therefore, I urge you to consider the issue of illiteracy in your deliberations and how Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) can help.

We need to take education to the doorsteps of those who need it the most.

Recently, I read a book entitled, “Finnish Lessons – What can the world learn from educational change in Finland,” by Pasi Sahlherg.

Let me quote what Martti Ahtisaari, the former President of Finland, and Nobel Price Laureate said in 2000, and that should, as educational experts, guide the process of your deliberations:

(Quote)

“During the next 10 years about 1.2 billion young 15-to-30-year-olds will be entering the job market and with the means now at our disposal about 300 millions of them will get a job. What will we offer these young, about a billion of them?

I think this is one of the greatest challenges if we want to achieve peaceful development and hope for these young.” (Unquote)
And as Pasi Sahlberg himself says, and I quote:

“It has become clear everywhere that the schools we have today will not be able to provide opportunities to learn what is necessary in the future. The demand for better quality teaching and learning, and more equitable and efficient education is universal.

Indeed, educational systems are facing a twin challenge: how to change schools so that students may learn new types of knowledge and skills required in a unpredictably changing knowledge world, and how to make that new learning possible for all young people regardless of their socioeconomic conditions. To be successful with these challenges is both a moral and economic imperative for our societies and their leaders. It is a moral obligation because each person’s well-being and ultimately happiness arises from knowledge, skills, and worldviews that good education provides. It is also an economic imperative because the wealth of nations depends as never before on know-how.

The aftermath of the recent global economic crisis is showing how unemployed young people are becoming hopeless. Many of these young people lack relevant education and training that would help them to help themselves.” (Unquote)

So, as you can see, there are critical challenges that lie ahead for our education sector.

And the big question is how do we transform our educational system to create more opportunities for our young people, while ensuring their continued and sustained employability in the global market.

As you know, educational policies have many purposes.

More importantly, they provide benefits to children and other learners.

They advance the learning that the society needs to secure its future.

And Henri David Thoreau, the famous American author, poet and philosopher, puts it more beautifully, and I quote:

“At the core of a country’s success and sustainability is its capacity to reconcile, harmonize, and integrate a high-performing economy, a superb education system and a socially just society.

All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place every second.” (Unquote)

If we were to cope with the onslaught of the educational challenges, there is no better way than to create greater access for our children and people, and Open and Distance Learning is one of the powerful and effective means to do so.

At the same time, teacher training as well as continuous professional development of teachers remains a priority area that needs further consideration.
Teaching is a glorious profession. Teachers can do magic.

Teachers have to be praised and prized for what they do, because they are seen as the builders of their nation.

If you want a high-performing school system, a competitive economy, and a cohesive society, you need the very best and mostly qualified teachers who have a deep and broad repertoire of knowledge and skills in the schools, especially that don’t have the luxury of screening out children.

In their book entitled, “Professional Capital, Transforming Teaching in Every School”, this is what Andy Hangreaves and Michaël Fullan had to say:

(Quote)

“People care about quality teaching. And this is putting teachers and teaching at the forefront of change.” (Unquote)

How to develop professional capital, how to circulate it and how to reinvest it so that you can create a dynamic new professional that will benefit every school in the nation, irrespective of the country you are from, are some of the questions that you may also have to address in the course of your deliberations.

Fear, force, and financial short-sightedness won’t get you a high quality teaching profession brimming with human, social and decisional capital.

In Mauritius, all primary school teachers must per force follow a two-year training before joining this noble profession.

But that is no longer sufficient.

Training and retraining of teachers have become imperative in the context of what is happening in the educational landscape.

Under Singapore’s “teach less, learn more” model, each teacher is entitled to 100 hours of professional development a year.

The demand for better quality teaching and learning and more equitable and efficient education is therefore universal.

We need some 1.7 million additional teachers globally if we are to achieve universal primary education by 2015!

It will not be possible to rely on only brick and mortar approaches to address the projected deficits.

High quality education for all starts with quality teachers and quality materials.

High quality education system thrives on high quality teachers in the first instance and on high quality schools and school leaders.
The quality of a school rarely exceeds the quality of its teachers.

Open distance learning (ODL) can help in this venture as it has the potential of creating maximum impact after minimum intervention.

Americas three largest providers of online education – edx, run by Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Coursera, with Academics from Stanford University and Audacity with Standford roots have provided courses for an estimated 12 million students so far.

Other individuals and Universities are also getting into the game.

Some of them will offer complete online degrees.

Online education programmes have several big advantages over traditional models.

These probably weigh most heavily with people living in developing countries.

Many MOOCs enthusiasts like to tell the story of Battusing Myanganbaryar, a Mongolian teenager who performed brilliantly in an online computer science course offered by MIT. EDX who had nearly 400,000 students in 2012-2013, reckons that almost half of them live outside the rich world.

Online education offers flexibility that the bricks-and-mortar sort cannot match.

Busy students can fit it around their job or family schedule, work at their own pace and sample courses from universities the world over without leaving their homes.

And critically, online courses are significantly cheaper, for example, new online master’s degree in computing at Georgia Tech costs just 7,000 US $ compared with 25,000 US $ for the on-campus alternative.

ODL can also promote partnerships and coalitions in order to maximise the impact.

In this room, you have come from different countries and with different experiences.

I would request you to use these two days to move beyond sharing of information.

Let this be an opportunity for you to build strong relationships that can help build a competent human resource base in your respective country.

Together, you can devise strategies to harness appropriate technologies such as mobile devices to promote innovations to reach the unreached.

Finally, in line with the vision of DEASA, let this Conference also be a framework for you to work together in order to respond to the world imperatives and emerging goals on education.
As you can see, I am eagerly looking forward to the outcomes of your Conference.

With these words, I would like to wish you a fruitful Conference and a pleasant stay in Mauritius.

I have the pleasure now to declare open this 49th DEASA Conference.

I thank you for your attention.