Good afternoon!

I would like to thank the University of Mauritius for having associated me with this 4th Advances in Hospitality and Tourism Marketing and Management Conference.

I extend my greetings to all the delegates who have travelled to Mauritius from different parts of the world to participate in this high level meeting.

It's such a pleasure to be in the midst of a plethora of academicians to reflect on a subject that has far reaching implications for our country.

As you know, tourism is the third pillar of our economy accounting for almost 7% of GDP, and 15% of the total employment.

It is also one of the main generators of foreign exchange earnings.

Indeed, receipts from tourism stood at 1.4 billion US dollars last year compared to approximately 1.2 billion US dollars in 2009, representing an effective annual growth rate of 5%.

The tourism sector has further been largely instrumental in improving the living standards of our population and uplifting many more from the shackles of poverty and marginalization.

That’s why I welcome the initiative of the University of Mauritius to host this Conference, which I am sure will generate ideas and proposals that will help evolve policy decisions on how to give a new boost and orientation to our tourism industry.
There are signs that in spite of the fragility of the global market, growth in the travel and tourism sector is improving gradually.

The latest annual research from the Word Travel and Tourism Council produced by Oxford Economics shows that 2013 was another successful year for the Travel & Tourism sector, off the back of an improving economy.

The direct contribution of Travel & Tourism to the world economy grew by 3.1% in 2013, contributing 2.2 trillion US dollars to world gross domestic product and 101 million jobs.

Receipts in destinations worldwide from expenditure by international visitors on accommodation, food and drink, entertainment, shopping and other services and goods reached an estimated 1159 billion US dollars or 873 billion Euros in 2013.

The tourism sector in Mauritius has also witnessed similar growth patterns.

Tourist arrivals increased steadily to reach 993,106 last year compared to 761,063 arrivals in 2005.

It is forecast that tourist arrivals this year will exceed the one million mark.

Such results confirm the increasingly important role of the tourism and hospitality sector in stimulating economic growth and contributing to international trade.

There is no doubt that Travel & Tourism remains a critical sector for development and economic growth for advanced, developing, as well as small island economies like Mauritius.

Developing a strong Travel and Tourism sector not only supports job creation, raises national income, but it also benefits the general competitiveness of a nation through improvements in hard and soft infrastructure.

The recent expansion of our airport facilities that required massive capital investment is testimony to Government’s commitment to the development of the travel and tourism industry.

The new airport terminal with state-of-the-art facilities will help to strengthen the competitiveness of our destination by expanding the airline services network into new and emerging tourism markets such as China and India.

Such measures have also been accompanied by changes in the regulatory framework in order to boost foreign direct investment in the tourism and hospitality sectors as demonstrated by the enactment of the Business Facilitation Act.

However, there are several challenges that need to be tackled as a matter of priority.

Because numerous obstacles at the national and international level continue to hinder the sustained development of this sector.
Like every other sector, tourism in Mauritius is exposed to a number of challenges such as:

- intense competition from emerging destinations and similar destinations;
- prolonged recession in our main source markets in the Euro Zone;
- changes in the aviation sector with the merging or alliance formation by major airlines;
- high price of fuel that adversely impact the cost of air travel and long-haul destinations like Mauritius; and
- shrinking demands from Europe coupled with the changing preferences of travelers.

To make matters worse, according to the 2013 Global Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index, Mauritius lost its number one spot in the Sub-Saharan Africa regional rankings, and has even been overtaken by Seychelles.

Out of 140 countries, Mauritius ranked 58th (down from 53rd in 2011) compared to 38th for Seychelles.

Mauritius has also seen its price competitiveness decline significantly, from 18th to the 75th rank in the last assessment carried out in 2011 as a result of the increase in hotel and fuel prices as well as high air ticket costs, taxes and airport charges.

The country’s limited and fragile environmental resources that are typical to small island economies also pose a serious challenge for the continued sustainability of the tourism sector.

There is, in my view, a need for a more coherent approach and better coordination and collaboration in the management and marketing of our tourism sector among all tourism public and private sector stakeholders.

Collaboration among key players of the tourism sector is a fundamental ingredient in sustainable development efforts and in developing a competitive destination.

And unless managed through appropriate policies, taking into account the underlying principles of sustainable development, there is every risk that the tourism and travel sectors will not remain competitive.

The crisis has brought to the fore the need for greater collaboration and synergies among countries.

If we can work together, share our experience of the crisis and develop common and durable proposals, I am sure the transition to recovery will be real and long lasting.

And this can only be done by taking significant steps to strengthen our economic governance, to reinforce the structures that underpin effective
governance – more importantly, review and change the policies that landed us into the crisis.

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

In addition to its economic dimension, tourism is also a vehicle that unites not only states but also people.

Due to the freedom of travel, the convenience of crossing borders, the tourism industry has played a key role in unifying the world economy as one big family.

Judging by the number of countries that are being represented in this Conference, there is no doubt that tourism is one of the driver’s of social and cultural unity.

But as I said in the beginning, the tourism sector is faced with unprecedented global challenges.

For example, climate change is now widely recognized as one of the defining challenges of the 21st century facing the travel and tourism industry.

The interrelationships and implications of climate change and, linked to this, tourism as an economic sector, social phenomenon, and psychologically and culturally important activity are being the subject of rigorous research by scholars world-wide.

As the body of literature on climate change and its multifaceted implications grows, it is increasingly evident that the climate change challenge appears to be a version of Hardin’s “tragedy of the commons”.

Furthermore, the world economy is still feeling the effects of a deep and structural economic and financial crisis.

I know that the impacts of the crisis are not the same in all parts of the world.

Whatever be the extent of the impact, the crude reality is that the crisis has many implications for all countries, the moreso, for a tourist – oriented economy such as ours.

Although, the 2013 Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index ranks Europe as the leading region for Travel and Tourism competiveness, no country, including those which top the rankings is shielded from the systemic crisis.

And this puts us in front of a great responsibility.

All of us who have leadership positions, be it in the private sector or be it in the public or political or academic domain, have a great responsibility to develop strategies and policies to stimulate sustained growth in this key sector of our economy.

Many countries have, although at times painfully, and at great social costs, been able to weather the storm.
There is evidence that tourism has resisted and is recovering from the crisis better than many other economic sectors.

But at this stage, when the economic upturn is still moderate and fragile, we need to continue our reform efforts and provide whatever impulses we can to our economy, and in particular, to those who need the recovery the most.

The threat of a jobless recovery is still haunting us.

I am therefore glad that the University of Mauritius has decided to take a lead role in assisting our policy makers on how to support an industry that is so vital for our economy.

Ladies and gentlemen

Distinguished participants

We are living in a highly complex, interdependent, and interconnected world.

Countries across the globe are confronted by major adaptive challenges as well as profound transformational opportunities that are increasingly influencing travel and tourism.

To succeed in this new and extremely competitive environment requires not only strategic agility but more importantly, the development of well-planned strategies that build and consolidate the travel, tourism and hospitality sectors.

That's why for me, this high level Conference comes at an opportune time for Mauritius.

I have seen the programme of your Conference.

I am really overwhelmed by the interesting topics that will be on your agenda during these three days.

The array of discussion papers that are being presented by eminent scholars, academics, and professionals of the travel and tourism field, together with the round table discussion on policy issues to promote sustainable tourism succinctly is an effective way to blend theory and practice.

I have no doubt that in the course of your deliberations, you will develop acceptable proposals and recommendations to overcome barriers towards sustained growth in the tourism sector and capitalize on key strengths that would promote sustainable tourism.

With these few words, I would like to thank you again for your invitation and I wish you good luck in your deliberations.

I thank you for your kind attention.