Chairperson, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Introduction

I am honoured to be able to extend a warm welcome to you, firstly, as delegates to a conference of this magnitude, and secondly, to those participants who come from afar, as guests to our country. I also wish to extend my gratitude to the organisers of this conference and our hosts, the University of Pretoria, the South African Institute for Distance Education, the National Association of Distance Education Organisations and the new University of South Africa, for organising this event.

I believe that this conference is a significant event in the distance education calendar of the nations of Africa. Its value lies not only in sharing the insights and experiences of developing countries, but also in grappling with vexing problems and finding clearer direction to
advance the cause of professionally developing teachers through distance education. Development of this nature is crucial because teachers are the bedrock of our society and they play a pivotal role in the advancement of our continent.

We are well aware of the fact that in Africa as a whole, there is a shortage of teachers. Children are in large classes and, according to a report in *News from Africa*, more than 40 million African children, 26 million being girls, receive no schooling. This constitutes almost half the school-age child population. If we are to achieve the *Education for All* goals of getting all children in Africa into school and provide them with quality education by 2015, Africa will need an additional 1,36 million teachers.

More than a decade ago, UNESCO forecast that Africa needed to expand its teaching force at a rate of 5.6 % per annum during the 1990s. The sad fact is that we have not managed to achieve this. UNESCO research shown that the teaching force over the last fifteen years has grown at only 3.4 per cent, slightly ahead of the growth in the number of children in school, but not at the rate needed to provide enough teachers for education for all.

Considering the 16,2% increase in enrolment in primary education and the 13,8% increase in learner numbers in secondary education, the availability of qualified teachers is critical. The current 2,5 million African teachers already in the system, many of whom are under-qualified and also untrained, have to be enabled to improve their qualifications and teaching competence in the shortest possible time.
Given this background, the scale of the potential demand for teachers cannot be met through conventional institutions and approaches to teacher education. Distance education appears to be the most viable option for training teachers and expanding their numbers in the envisaged numbers that are required.

Distance education does, however, have its sceptics and its detractors. Allow me to share with you the views of two students on their conception of learning and what they consider education to be. The first quote is that of a student coming from a traditional, face-to-face teaching environment, and reads as follows:

“Education is still sort of learning facts and dates and names, rather than the content. When I have to read something, I worry about taking in what is said. I also get very worried at a tutorial when my tutor begins picking the units to bits and questioning it – I don’t want to pull the unit to bits; I accept what they have to tell me. Sometimes I may not like what is said, but I accept what is there because I assume they know what they are talking about and why they are putting it to me this way - spoon feeding me. After all, I’m someone who is unlikely to understand it any other way.”

The next quote is from a student who experienced a variety of learning approaches over a 5-year period, including that of distance education. This person’s views are:
“Real learning is something personal and it also something continuous. Once it has started, it carries on and on and it might lead to other things. The unit of work you are given is only a catalyst really, it is only one hundredth of the learning and the rest goes on once you put the book down. The next time you talk to someone or read something in the newspaper, that’s when the rest happens, because its been started and you carry it on for yourself because you want to and you get something lasting from it.”

I mention these two examples because there is still a prevailing notion and misconception that distance education is often only a second best option when it comes to educational and training provision. I believe, though, that distance educational approaches, when structured and implemented with circumspection, can provide a range of educational experiences and support that is rich, meaningful and effective.

To achieve these ends, our own Department of Education is developing measures to ensure that the quality of programmes being offered through distance education in Higher education are of equal, if not better, quality than those offered through only face-to-face methods. Measures are also being developed to ensure that another key requirement for successful distance education is present, namely that of effective student support.

But no discourse on distance education can be complete if we do not consider that array of technologies available for the delivery of
distance education. Technology can be an effective vehicle for transforming education and creating opportunities for increased access to education and training programmes. But the principles of offering quality programmes and effective learner support should never be compromised by or made subservient to technology solutions.

Technology makes certain demands on teachers, learners, managers and administrators in education to which we need to respond if we are not to be overwhelmed or disempowered by it. For this, we need what can be termed as skills for the 21st Century.

The need for these skills indicates to us that future success in our global society requires significantly different sets of skills than what was required in the past, skills that we as policymakers and educators still need to clarify and define. We need to be clear what it means to be "educated" in the digital age and the skills that are required to be global players in the 21st Century. As education leaders, we need to understand the nature of these skills and formally incorporate them into the mainstream of school curriculum, instruction and assessment. This presents us with one of the challenges that we need to deliberate on when determining content for teacher development.

In conclusion, as a participant at this conference, I would be asking myself:

- What would I like to see emanating from it?
• What would I like to take back to my institution or country that will make a positive difference?

• How should I judge the value of the conference?

Permit me to offer a few suggestions:

• How we can use distance education to assist us in dealing with the challenge of training an estimated 2 million teachers required in Africa to meet our education and training needs for the next decade?

• In what ways can distance education assist us to address existing disparities in the availability of teachers in rural and urban areas?

• Is it possible to deliver initial and continuing learning to teachers in remote areas in a way that does not lure them away from these areas?

• What funding strategies could be employed to offer distance education programmes cost-effectively to teachers?

• Can we structure continuing development programmes without taking teachers away from their classrooms for any length of time?

• To what extent can constructive partnerships be established to promote teacher development through distance learning?

• Can distance education be used to train teachers in technical and vocational education and training?

• Is it possible to use distance education to develop the skills of teachers to use information and communication technology in education and to develop 21st Century skills?
• What is the possibility of seeing some real joint projects and partnerships to share teacher initial and continuing development programmes across the continent?

• Finally, could I expect to return home with greater clarity of purpose and understanding of the possibilities of distance education, including how it could be used to achieve the educational objectives of NEPAD?

Ladies and gentlemen, with these challenges in mind, I wish you all a very enjoyable and successful DETA 2005 Conference. May it bear quality fruit for the learning environment of our teachers and assist us as the nations of Africa, can take our rightful place in the global society and knowledge–driven world.

I thank you.