Dear Distinguished Experts and Participants,

A very good morning to all of you. On behalf of UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education based in Bangkok, Thailand, I would like to welcome all of you to Hong Kong to attend the expert meeting on Building the Capacity of Higher Education Institutions in Asia and the Pacific for Blended Learning.

I would like to thank the Hong Kong Institute of Education for collaborating with UNESCO Bangkok in co-organizing this important event. My special thanks go to Prof. Lim Cher Ping and his team for their effective and efficient coordination and preparation for this meeting.

UNESCO is very keen to promote the use of technology in the delivery of higher education programmes and regards this as one of its biennial priorities for higher education. The reason is that technology offers unprecedented opportunities to reduce the long existing learning divide and promote quality and effective learning in different levels of education institutions, including higher education.

This meeting is just the beginning of a two-year regional project initiated by UNESCO Bangkok in collaboration with the Hong Kong Institute of Education, aiming to develop a toolkit for blended learning for higher education institutions in Asia and the Pacific.

The purpose of this meeting is to begin taking stock of good practices of blended learning from higher education institutions in the region and deliberate on the outline of case study reports that will be developed and
submitted before the end of November this year. Building on this foundation, the goal for next year is to develop a toolkit for blended learning for higher education institutions in the Asia-Pacific region.

Here today I am pleased to see nine experience-rich higher education institutions from seven countries and systems taking part in this important stocktaking exercise. We very much hope that based on the outline agreed in this meeting, we can develop quality case study reports that could be published by UNESCO and inform other UNESCO Member States in this region.

Blended learning has been around for many years and is interrelated with many other different terms, such as hybrid learning, technology-mediated instruction, web-enhanced instruction, mixed-mode instruction, and dual-mode instruction, etc. Whatever the terms we adopted, the main idea is to encourage traditional brick-and-mortar higher education institutions to increase their use of online learning in the delivery of their routine study programmes, along with the traditional face-to-face, classroom-based learning.

This requires higher education institutions to increase their awareness about the benefits of online learning to learners in terms of flexible and individualized learning arrangements, enriched learning experiences, and students’ attitudes and motivations towards learning, as well as its limitations.

Higher education institutions should also establish a favorable internal ecosystem to support blended learning as a concept and within daily operations, which includes, among others, robust infrastructure and support systems, effective learning management systems, curriculum development and evaluation mechanisms, professional development opportunities for faculty leaders and teaching staff, student support, and partnership and communication, etc. I am glad that each of these issues will be discussed during this meeting.

We all know that blended learning is not yet deeply rooted in higher education institutions in this region. Some people tend to be skeptical about the quality of online learning. Therefore, quality assurance of online learning is essential in getting blended learning widely accepted as a new modality of learning for higher education institutions. I hope we
can collect good practices in this area from the presentations of our participating higher education institutions in this meeting.

Another point is that blended learning is not only about the use of technology. It is more about the integration of technology, pedagogy and content, which means that we need to think of establishing a mechanism to bring experts in technology, pedagogy and content to work together in a mutually supportive manner. This can be one of the most challenging issues ahead of us.

These are the things that I would like to request your kind consideration when elaborating on the outline for the case study reports, as well as the framework of the toolkit we are planning to develop.

As you know, UNESCO led the global debate on the post-2015 global education agenda, which was just concluded in the World Education Forum held last month in Incheon, the Republic of Korea. The outcome document, the Incheon Declaration, reiterated the importance of ICT in strengthening education systems, knowledge dissemination, information access, quality and effective learning, and more effective service provision.

Immediately after the Incheon World Forum on Education, the International Conference on ICT and Post-2015 Education was held in Qingdao, China and concluded with the Qingdao Declaration, through which member states agreed to develop well-informed long-term policies and strategies to unleash the potential of ICT to achieve greater quality in education and transform learning.

We very much hope that the new project to develop a toolkit for blended learning for higher education institutions in Asia and the Pacific can serve as an important follow-up to both the Incheon Declaration and the Qingdao Declaration and contribute to the quality improvement of teaching and learning in higher education institutions in the future.

Once again, thank you for your participation. I wish you a fruitful and productive meeting and enjoy your stay in Hong Kong.

*Thank you very much for your attention!*