It is my pleasure to welcome you to this conference on E-education: Environments, Effectiveness, Economics and Expectations.

NUS is glad of this opportunity to host such a conference. It is clearly timely and should prove useful for all of us in education.

Education has rightly been responsive to the technological advances which have yielded new and potentially powerful tools. These have triggered quantitative as well as qualitative changes in the conduct of teaching and learning.

In the last 2 decades, the University has evolved into what is today a virtually borderless campus. The IT Strategic Plan is part of its forward-looking vision, which the University was fortunate to have the resources to realise.

NUS is working at the forefront of IT adoption, transforming itself into a ‘smart’ campus, with high connectivity and state-of-the-art equipment.

However, good hardware alone does not good education make. We must constantly remind ourselves that technology is only a tool; the technology tail must not be permitted to wag the education dog.

It is imperative that we as educators keep first principles in mind. As an institution of higher learning, our priority must be to ensure that quality learning takes place and that our learners are facilitated in the best possible way to achieve this. We also need to be clear about what constitutes quality learning outcomes so that we can measure our performance against those indicators.

Education has undergone major changes particularly in the last decade. Technology, globalisation and other social, political and economic pressures have together brought about a paradigm shift.

With information now freely available and growing at an exponential rate, teaching is no longer about the transfer of a finite body of knowledge; learners have to be empowered to learn how to learn so that they can continue to do so and thereby extend their effective shelf life.

Life-long learning has replaced the traditional life-phase approach which has become inadequate to respond to future needs.

With knowledge refresh increasingly a necessity, new ways have to be found that are efficient and effective; efficient in delivering ‘just-in-time’ with minimal disruption to productive working life, and effective in ensuring real transfer.

E-education certainly has the potential to satisfy both demands; the challenge is in working out how best to do it.

E-education is not simply transferring the classroom to online. It is certainly not about dumping information indiscriminately on the web.

As a colleague at NUS once remarked, if ‘Lecture-on-demand’ is merely a matter of putting one’s lecture notes on the web, it is no better than sticking them on the wall and calling it ‘Lecture-on-the-wall’.

Clearly, new technologies have to be judiciously exploited to maximise their potential. And as with traditional face-to-face teaching, the content has to be well conceived, designed and delivered in ways that leverage on the capability of IT.
Care has to also be exercised to ensure that the use of IT is appropriate for the learning task. Former President of Harvard, Derek Bok, for instance, has rightly raised some doubts about computers being able to contribute much to the learning of open-ended subjects such as moral philosophy, social theory and literary criticism.

In time, advances in fuzzy logic and AI may change this, which leads me to reinforce the point that machines are only as good as the human minds that manage them and provide them the input.

Ultimately, the quality of learning achieved is what matters. NUS has built a robust learning platform; it must continue to be vigilant in ensuring that what goes on it is of the highest quality and really does the job of educating.

And that is to nurture our learners into educated individuals: individuals grounded in solid values, possessing effective thinking skills and the ability and passion to learn on a life-long basis.

In this endeavour I believe there is much that we can learn from one another. We have among us here today representatives from MOM, IDA, KRDL, SAFTI Military Institute, ISS as well as the schools and various IHLs. Such meeting of minds must surely generate highly productive exchanges.

I wish you all an enjoyable and fruitful conference.