It is estimated that ten billion emails were sent around the world each day during 2002. By 2005 it is expected that we will be sending twenty-five billion every day.

By 2005 it is reckoned that a significant proportion of users with IT [information technology] access around the world will be learning online. So where does the British Council fit in?

One of our main objectives is to meet the learning aspirations of our key target audience – young professionals aged between eighteen and thirty. Traditionally we have done this by providing information and knowledge through our libraries – and libraries are and will remain very important as a learning resource.

Internet and digital technologies are now becoming mainstream in many of the countries that the British Council works in. A new generation of our target audiences is growing up techno-savvy, with expectations that organisations should be online. In a number of countries, use of the internet in the learning and education arena is now part of the schools curriculum. And, in the same way that many of us cannot imagine life before the telephone, many of the new generation cannot envisage life without email and the internet.

Here at the British Council we recognised quite early on that the balance of engagement with our audiences was changing. To keep up with the rapid pace of technological developments and the new online world order, we have developed a number of new products and services.

The balance of engagement has changed in several ways. Although people still expect and value the face-to-face contact (and this will never stop), we found that increasingly they also wanted to find things for themselves in the privacy of their homes, or using these online services from our premises. It's quick, personal and cheap to do. Even with an extensive physical presence, in certain countries (India, China and Russia, to name a few), we were still miles, and in some cases hundreds of miles, too far away for a significant proportion of the population to reach. In addition, the logistics of the teaching centres and the sheer numbers going through meant that, to remain competitive, we had to offer online participation and registration services.

All of this is very much in line with the Prime Minister's e-government agenda, Britain Online. The British Council is one of three organisations taking this forward (the other two being BBC Worldwide and the British Tourist Authority).

We are working in a wide range of areas – in information, governance, sport, creativity and education as well as the sites for the 109 countries in which we work. I do hope that you will take this opportunity to look at the various websites and online services we have developed or are in the process of developing.

To highlight a few:
Web2003. The biggest online project ever undertaken by the British Council. It's about upgrading the 109 virtual office windows – the country sites – onto a common technical platform, re-developing content in the way we know our customers access information and introducing the new brand online. It’s a multimillion pound project that will complete at the end of the year.

EducationUK. We created this to support the Prime Minister’s Initiative and it is now one of our most visited sites. LearnEnglish – consistently one of our most popular sites, with usage growing every month. And Connecting Futures – a community site launched to support our work in bringing young people from the Muslim world closer to those in the West.

These are a sample. If you have time, do take a moment to look at the breadth and depth of our online engagement.

Thank you very much indeed for coming along this evening.