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## Experts highlight challenges of eLearning

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Despite the huge potential of e-learning to improve Africa's educational and manpower needs, the hydrant evils of erratic power supply, weak ICT infrastructure and near absence of experts to provide the necessary guide have combined to rob the continent of any chance at improving its stake in the evolving information society, said experts at a three-day e-learning conference that ended at the weekend inside Ghana's administrative capital, Accra.

Agreeably to the experts, "ICTs have already begun to exert massive transformation of education systems worldwide. Distance education universities are now quoted on the stock exchange. The best teachers in the world are becoming available anywhere at the click of a mouse while 'Lifelong Learning' has become the order of the day."

But Africa is outside the radar of these opportunities. Only few countries such as Kenya and perhaps, Uganda could boast of success stories with limited but appreciable impacts achieved through specific e-learning models.

In larger countries such as Nigeria with a huge population where millions are still cut off from traditional learning windows and where the potential to spread educational opportunities through e-learning is high, some experts regret that government and policy makers have not been able tap into this 'massive opportunity.'

Regrettably, the experts agreed that the comments of Ms. Josephine Ouédraogo Acting Deputy Executive Secretary, UN Economic Commission for Africa at the 2006 e-Learning Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia still applies to the entire continent in 2008. Ouédraogo had observed that: "ICT offers opportunities for distance education to people living in rural areas, as well as provides support to learning, teaching and management processes within the education system. It can also be used to support teachers who lack adequate skills and knowledge. Therefore the continent needs to strive to ensure that the literacy and e-literacy of its population can create a skilled workforce to support the emerging Knowledge Economy.

"Unfortunately, the particular opportunities presented by ICT as a means for transforming the path of development through education remain largely untapped in Africa. The key challenges facing Africa's quest for an e-learning environment are among others: limited infrastructure, lack of experts and expertise to develop and support applications and systems within this new environment. These challenges, if unchecked can create greater digital gaps between countries and within countries – exacerbating the rural –urban dichotomy. As a result, the skills gap will be between a student able to access the web for research and one who cannot access the basic traditional library facilities, for instance.

Moreover, the education systems are often stretched with limited financial resources."

With inadequate funding coupled with the problems of inaccessible, expensive bandwidth and frequent power blackouts, "it has practically been impossible to deploy e-learning. No Nigerian university could effectively run the solution" to expand educational opportunities or improve the quality of existing education, said Mr. Omowaiye Remi, ICT Assistant to the Vice Chancellor, Ladoke University of Technology in Nigeria.

Nigeria, perhaps, offers the worst example of the continent's inability to use technology to leapfrog its educational system into the new Information Society, said Isaac Olunfemi, vice president of the Nigerian Society of Engineers and lecturer at the Lagos State Polytechnic. Every year, almost a million candidates apply for the limited spaces in Nigerian universities and less than 10% of this ever get admitted into the university system, the rest could be conveniently admitted if a robust e-learning were in place that does not require learning interaction between lecturers and students in a fixed mortar and brick location.

Though there are attempts by some governments to erase the barriers, the problem of connectivity and regular power supply would still take some time to be resolved. Nigeria is seeking to address the connectivity problem through the launch of its communication satellite, Nigcomsat-1 designed to offer low cost bandwidth. "Nigcomsat has specific for e-learning," said Chief Executive Officer of Nigcomsat Limited Ahmed Rufai. At continental level, the continent's political leaders have invested massively in the pan-African satellite RascomQAF-1 geared at providing affordable satellite backbone across the continent. A number of terrestrial connectivity projects are also going on in several African countries. "These hopefully should help. But it would take some time," said one participant from Kenya.

Africa has no option outside of investing in the new window for learning, said George Siemens of University of Manitoba Learning Technologies Centre, Canada to eLearning Africa of Berlin based ICWE and Hoffmann & Reif Consultants, organisers of the event. "Education is one of the most productive ways of moving a society forwards by many different metrics, perhaps most notably, in terms of quality of life. As barriers and limitations to education are reduced – through initiatives such as open educational resources and fairly inexpensive information communication technologies – opportunities to provide education to a broader audience are increased.

"The growth of the information-based economy theoretically creates a new space where geographical location plays a less critical role. The industrial revolution was often confined to a certain geography, often due to access to natural resources or a skilled labour force. While these elements still exist, they are less pronounced in their influence on information-intensive economies. The challenge facing countries in Africa is to build a skill base where the population can participate in this new economy. While barriers still exist in re-skilling a population, they are much lower than they have been at any time in the past."

eLearning Africa is the largest gathering of eLearning and distance education professionals in Africa, enabling participants to develop multinational and cross-

industry contacts and partnerships, as well as to enhance their knowledge, expertise and abilities. A rotating event hosted by a different African government every year, it supports and reinforces the growing pan-African eLearning community. Previous editions have held in Kenya and Ethiopia.

In attendance at the Ghana's edition were more than 1440 delegates from 83 The event was opened by Vice President of Ghana Alhaji Aliu Mahama with 315 speakers and chairpersons from 54 countries in attendance. In all, there were four plenary sessions, 66 sessions in 11 parallel conference strands and 48 demonstrations with best practice examples heralded by 14 pre-conference events.