

Kenya to host Africa e-Learning conference

By MICHAEL OUMA

KENYA will host Africa's second e-learning conference from May 25 to 31. The first session of the conference is to be held in Mombasa on May 25 before it moves to Nairobi between May 28 to 30. The last session of the pan African event will be held in Kisumu on May 31.

Speaking during a pre-event press briefing, Education permanent secretary, Prof Karega Mutahi said e-Learning Africa is a pan-African conference with a focus on ICT for development, education and training on the continent.

The PS said participants would deliberate on how to supplement the conventional classroom teaching through the use of ICT tools and solutions, as this would soon see the teacher's role change to that of facilitator and mentor to students.

The conference is organised by ICWE GmbH and Hoffmann & Reif Consultants in cooperation with the Ministry of Education to establish and link a network and community of decision makers from governments and administrations with universities, schools, governmental and private training providers, industry, and important partners in development cooperation.

The theme of the 2007 conference is 'Building infrastructures and capacities to reach out to the whole of Africa'. The conference is meant to offer stakeholders an opportunity to reflect on the significant efforts made by African countries to set up their national and regional ICT infrastructures to improve access to education, training and services for all.

It aims to offer an opportunity for vendors from various countries to showcase their e-learning products and solutions, which they might want to adopt and use within their country. It will also provide an opportunity for Kenya to re-examine her initiatives and achievements in this area.

Speaking at the same briefing, Prof Peter Kinyanjui (formerly Commonwealth of Learning), said global trends had changed, necessitating the need for "getting education to where the people are instead of having people come to institutions."

The forum brings together ICT practitioners, policy makers, industry leaders, as well as research and development experts from Africa, Asia, Americas and Europe. These would enable African participants to take account of the challenges, achievements, and the strategies as well as the opportunities for trans-continental co-operation. Part of the initiative is the Nepad e-schools project.

Eighty countries have confirmed attendance with 300 proposals submitted from 46 countries.

Mutahi said Kenya as host country would benefit from the gathering as it would give local ICT professionals an opportunity to engage in discourse to share ideas and experiences on ICT and e-learning, which if well managed could supplement

traditional methods of curriculum delivery, particularly in the middle-level colleges and universities.

"In this conference, we hope to provide the opportunity for the policy makers and other stakeholders to effectively dialogue on how to exploit the huge potentials advanced telecommunications technologies offer for the benefit of the people of the continent," said the PS.

Mutahi said numerous proposals had been received from public institutions, higher education and training institutions and development organisations.

The conference will also feature the first African high-level policy makers and industry leaders roundtable retreat, entitled "accelerating the building of ICT infrastructures and capacities for African education systems". Key participants in this forum will be ministers of Education from Africa and other selected countries.

It is envisaged that deliberations at the roundtable and retreat will provide an opportunity to understand the African situation with regard to ICTs, especially in education and training.

The knowledge gathered will form the basis for the establishment of sustainable frameworks for the exchange of ideas among African policy makers and ICT practitioners.

Apart from the roundtable, other side events will include lectures in Kenyan universities, aimed at addressing fundamentals in e-learning as well as research and development topics in technology-enhanced education and training. Part of these will be the two public e-lectures to be hosted at Mombasa Polytechnic and Maseno University on May 25 and 31 respectively.

Participants will be drawn from institutions under various sectors including education, science, technology and industry. Speakers have been identified from among Kenyan and international experts. There will also be two break-out workshops addressing the needs of rural areas and regional institutions.

The conference seeks to reverse a statistical trend which shows that very few African countries participate in international e-learning conferences such as on-line Educa-Berlin, the largest e-learning conference in the world, held in Berlin every year for the past 14 years.

It is meant to establish and nurture links and networks amongst African decision-makers and tertiary and university institutions as well as with service providers in the industry and partners in development cooperation.

The annual conference is held on rotational basis with the first hosted by Ethiopia last year. Various institutions have e-Learning activities in the country. These include Nairobi, Kenyatta, Egerton, and Maseno University. Others are USIU and Strathmore University while Nepad's e-Learning project has been initiated in one primary and six secondary schools.