

# **ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ICT CENTRE TO SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION AND BUSINESS IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY: MASERU, LESOTHO, AFRICA**

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## **Introduction**

Africa remains the continent known for its lack of resources and above all, poverty. Education levels are amongst the lowest in the world. The use of new technologies is often seen as a possible means of accelerating the provision of education in under-developed areas.

Lack of access to high technology may be the single largest obstacle to using any form of technology to expand the provision of education. Developed countries enjoy facilities such as personal telephones in homes and cable television; these have not become common in Africa.

Computer laboratories and remote lecturing facilities if provided on a non-cost-recovery basis remain dependent on donor funds and may be susceptible to financial difficulties. It is against the backdrop of the great needs of the continent and the necessity to make any new venture self-sustaining that Telisa was conceptualised. Information on the Telisa Initiative may be found on the Internet at <http://pgw.org/telisa>.

## **Existing examples**

Various examples of shared access to computer equipment, especially, do exist. Other access is also important in Africa and must also be considered. Students frequently do not have their own study space. A simple, well-lit desk in a quiet place is not available to many students in Africa.

### Internet Cafés

Internet cafés have become more visible in areas such as computer stores, large shopping malls and business hotels. The fees charged are expected to recoup the costs of all capital equipment, running costs and pay salaries and profits to the providers of capital. For this reason, prices have to be set sufficiently high and venues carefully chosen to attract a high enough profile of clientele. The cost of capital and higher running costs (because of location) can push prices charged for access to rates above what students can afford.

### Study Centres

These have become more popular to try to provide quiet study areas for students who would otherwise not have such facilities. These are frequently provided free of charge by the registering institution but may also be provided by a consortium of institutions. There is resistance by students to institutions charging for these facilities and few grounds for this to become a self-sustaining a commercial venture.

### Business Support Centres

These centres, mostly supported by local government structures and entrepreneurship development, are appearing in South African cities. Their establishment is usually sponsored through local taxes and offer business services at subsidised rates. Once again, this kind of project depends on ongoing funds being received from an external source.

## **A new model**

In an attempt to find a new business model a number of concepts were brought together.

### Capital Requirements

The capital requirements of initial expenses of a new technology access centre may be daunting and if corners are cut could result in the centre being technically unreliable. The cost of capital is too high to repay at market or subsidised rates if affordable prices for services are to be charged to people in locations where traditional business would not even open. To further complicate this, the cost of capital replacement and upgrading must be included into the operating budget of the Centre.

The solution found here was to secure the entire capital costs by selling advertising or sponsorship space at the centre. Companies prepared to sponsor the start-up costs of a centre are offered building advertising space on the outside walls. The company may also use the existence of the centre and its financial involvement in its own brochures, advertising and reports. Naming rights are granted to the sponsoring company for a minimum period (e.g. minimum 3 years).

The capital does not in this way have to be repaid, as it is a cash injection in lieu of advertising. Companies wanting to expand an awareness of their work in the particular sub-region, country or city should be approached.

In the case of the ICT Centre in Maseru, Lesotho, the Daimler-Benz AG corporation agreed to provide the initial capital and selected the name:

Centre for Distance Education in Lesotho  
Sponsored by Daimler-Benz AG of Germany

### Equipment

In an attempt to give the centre as much of a chance of survival as possible, a range of services was planned to be offered from the start. These services should encourage both students (secondary and tertiary) and the business community to use the centre and be of such a useful nature that clients are prepared to pay for their usage. Initial equipment and services to suit the local needs included:

- Telephones (in booths with chairs)
- Computers (connected to the Internet)
- Colour and black-and-white only printers
- Document scanning
- Document binding
- Document lamination

### Additional services

Once the centre is fully functioning, equipment may be used by a micro-entrepreneur to run services such as document typing and other basic secretarial services using the centre as an office base (paying the centre for its services and in turn charging for their own value added).

## **Challenges in Implementation**

Implementing any project in a developing country needs extraordinary patience and commitment. Project leaders do not normally receive additional support for the new work they undertake in the interests of their institution, city or community.

Challenges incurred during the implementation of this project included the following:

1. Political instability and military action against Lesotho by forces of the Southern African Development Community.
2. Possibility of hijacking while the equipment was in transit and awaiting installation.
3. Border and customs issues.
4. Lack of phone lines. New phone lines can take one to two years to be installed.
5. Lack of appropriate and licensed telephone management equipment.
6. All staff involved in the project took on this responsibility in addition to their other workload.

These challenges should be seen as normal when working in developing countries. Individuals not prepared to face the constant delays and challenges should refrain from embarking on projects such as these. For those who are prepared to undertake the challenges, it is essential to have supportive institutions (management) backing up their actions.

## **Official Opening**

The centre is to be officially opened on Saturday 6 March by senior management of Daimler-Benz AG, The National University of Lesotho and Technikon SA. This will mark the culmination of commitment and effort in a three-party, three-country, public-private partnership.

## **Future Opportunities**

Primary lessons learned in this project (Challenges in Implementation) will provide invaluable in planning further centres. Technikon SA is establishing three ICT Centres in South Africa to further refine business models under varying circumstances.

The progress with the Centre for Distance Education in Lesotho will be documented in case studies at intervals following the official opening.

A reception site for the satellite signals of the African Virtual University is under consideration and may be added to the ICT Centre as a further self-sustainable business.

## **Conclusion**

Centres to provide access to technology are essential to people in Africa. Large numbers of individuals will not be able to own their own computers or have private access to the Internet in their lifetimes. A new business model that takes into account the urgency and great need for development in Africa and is sensitive to circumstances different to the traditional business setting is introduced in this paper.

Capital costs may be offset against legitimate sponsorships as have been done with sport and television channels for many years. Entrepreneurs' financial requirements must be tempered by their circumstances to offer much needed services at affordable rates.

There is a great need for people to support and drive projects to provide technology access centres that cater to the needs of their particular communities. Institutional management must recognise the responsibility that national institutions have in the development of their country's economy and improvement of living standards. To simply offer educational programmes and expect students without even electricity telephones and housing to provide their own Internet-computer is not realistic.

The responsibility for reconstruction and development in developing countries lies not simply with the government of the day but with each developing country's' national resources - including educational institutions.

The individuals who take on the implementation of economic and technological developmental projects such as the one outlined in this paper need the full backing of their institutions. It is these individuals who bring into reality the role of their institution as a national resource for their own region or country.

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