

Speech of the Minister Communications, Radhakrishna Padayachie at the Launch of the E-Skills Knowledge Production & Coordination Hub, KwaZulu-Natal

It is a pleasure to be here this afternoon as my first official visit to Durban in my role as the Minister for Communications. This is an important occasion as it marks the start of a most important journey for our country. Colleagues, **on the 19 November** shortly after being appointed as the Minister, I gave a media briefing where I **laid out the framework, approach and the strategic priorities for the Department for the next 12 months**. Please let me reiterate some of the important points made at that time that are relevant for us here today.

The Department of Communications has set itself a target of being **“A Global Leader in the Development and use of ICT’s for socio-economic development and the betterment of People’s lives”**. As I pointed out on that occasion, this can only be achieved through building a people - centered inclusive information society and knowledge based economy.

A **fundamental issue** in actualising this important target for our country is **the establishment of the e-Skills Institute as a catalytic collaborator in e-skilling the Nation** in relation to employment readiness: effective e-governance and service delivery; business development; socio-economic development, and; research and development

Friends, as we well know in our very being and our Government clearly recognises, our country faces a very serious issue around skilling itself for a sustainable place in today’s world and this can only happen if we focus on what is also needed in tomorrow’s world. In this quest we must face some uncomfortable truths if we are to be successful and if we are to provide the base for increasing prosperous equity in our society and positioning ourselves for global competitiveness.

The **first uncomfortable truth** is that despite all of our best efforts in government service delivery and the commitment of many skilful and dedicated people right across our government departments at the National, Provincial and local levels and despite some very significant gains in some areas, **the problem we face in skilling our people for tomorrow’s world is not getting any smaller**. We are not alone in having to find new and innovative ways to address this growing problem; even the economies right across Europe have found that in rebuilding their economies since the Global Financial Crisis, they need to develop focussed programmes to address the matter of e-Skills. So we in South Africa need to find smarter ways, creative ways and innovative ways to address this important task in a context that is appropriate to a developmental state such as ours.

The **second uncomfortable truth** is that the advent of Information Technology and its modern development which is occurring at break neck speed has changed the way of the world. No matter how remote our place in the world is, we simply cannot be removed from the impact of modern Information Technologies. Further **ICT is changing the positioning of economies right around the world and those that do not have good solid plans to deal with this will simply fall behind and their people will continue to be impoverished**.

We see the stark reality of Kenya and South Korea; in speaking of this recently, President Barak Obama (whose African ancestral home is Kenya) pointed out just some 20 years ago Kenya had the same GDP as South Korea which is now arguably one of the leading IT nations in the world. The difference is one of focus, one of commitment and one of action. We need to take heed of these lessons. Many of us can still remember 1990 (20 years ago) like it was yesterday, so the realisation of positional change in this new world is a tangible and achievable thing within relatively short time frames.

The **third uncomfortable truth** is that **South Africa has been dropping down the global ranking for e-readiness**. This is not because we are not progressing or that our programs are not working but simply because the others are moving faster than we are. As we know these rankings take time to compile and when they are announced they refer to the past often up to 3 years in the past. Hence, it is difficult to determine in a day by day time frame just how we are going. But the simple reality is that we can’t continue to react to these things in retrospect – that is just a losing game. Therefore, we must be proactive in this new world of change. We must be innovative and we must harness our collective knowledge, skills and efforts if we are to be successful.

I am delighted to be a part of a Government and be the Minister of a Department that has recognised the importance of these uncomfortable truths and the need to act innovatively and decisively to build a way forward. We recognise that the development of ICT is going at break neck speed and we are working hard to get modern infrastructure in place across our Nation. But as we know the new technology will be largely mobile and not totally reliant on hard wired infrastructure. South Africans right across our nation have recognised this for some time and we have one of the highest penetrations of cell phones anywhere on the continent. But this infrastructure is just one side of the equation.

The other side is about **how do we proactively make best use of the new technology to improve people's life chances and living environments in their personal lives, their work opportunities, their communities and their governance.** e-Skilling our nation so that we are all better prepared to make effective use of the technology to improve equitable prosperity and global competitiveness is a high priority of the Department of Communications. The government has recognised that this is a complex business operating right across the breadth and depth of our socio-economic frameworks and that this issue of adequately e-skilling our people cannot be addressed without the involvement of all stakeholder groups.

We are very committed to building solid, physical, real and engaged platforms for action that provide for recognised collaborations.

Over the last two years, the e-Skills Institute which has been tasked to address this matter has been involved in a wide consultation process with all stakeholder groups within the country and with collaborative organisations and countries across the world. This effort which culminated in **the first South African e-Skills Summit attended by more than 300 Thought Leaders** from South Africa and around the world held in July this year.

This Summit has now laid out the basis for us to take a new collaborative approach to dealing with our very large e-skills deficit and in positioning South Africa into a leadership role in this space.

The e-Skills Summit process over the last two years has produced a National e-Skills National Plan of Action (NeSPA) as a working document to align efforts of all stakeholder groups to the Medium Term Strategic Framework which is our National 'blue print' for positively impacting on our pressing socio-economic needs.

The central recommendation of the NeSPA was the establishment of e-Skills Knowledge Production Hubs in each Province to

- coordinate effort at the local level addressing real needs with the energy, knowledge, networks and commitment of all key stakeholders
- develop relevant curricula and training,
- establish a sound basis for innovative research and evaluation tied to the MTSF and which provides us with substance to develop relevant policy that all of us can relate to and own
- test new approaches, and
- provide places for the best brains from academia, business, government and civil society from right across the world to come and be a part of us in developing solutions and innovative approaches relevant to our developmental state.

Colleagues, right across this country we have many, many efforts in business, in government, in education, in civil society with our money and with donor agency money from across the world trying hard with very admirable intent to make a difference in dealing with the fundamental socio-economic matters we face as a Nation.

However, the simple truth is that what is missing is the network architecture that can bring this effort together in a coordinated manner

- to avoid duplication (which we simply cannot afford),

- to identify the gaps and
- to build the substance we need to develop innovative approaches to our needs at the local level.

This is where we as a Department can provide some useful action. **The call from the e-Skills Summit for the establishment of e-Skills Knowledge Production Hubs was clear and we have heard the message and we are going to act.**

To be effective these e-Skills Knowledge Production Hubs need to be places where representatives from all stakeholder groups

- feel comfortable,
- feel that they can make a contribution to make a difference and
- be a place where the best independent knowledge, praxis, policy development and evaluation can take place.

In a modern world our Universities need to be centres of leadership for the emerging age; they need to be much more than just only credentialing 'manufacturing plants' that teach, qualify and produce students as outputs. They need to be encouraged to help us develop new thinking, test new approaches and build collaborations between business, government, global education, civil society and donor agencies. This is an emerging trend in engaged Universities right across the world, especially in developmental states.

And we need to act in this space quickly so that we can deliver a sound basis for boosting competitiveness, productivity and employability of the workforce in knowledge based economies.

In this situation we all need to clearly understand that the concept of e-Skills is well beyond the ICT sector alone – it simply involves all aspects of our society, our businesses, our education and our competitiveness. It is well beyond the concepts of artisan or manufacturing skills alone and it involves serious application, analysis, integration, research policy development and evaluation across the full socio-economic spectrum of our Nation.

It is real work for engaged Higher Education Institutions that are serious about providing sustainable futures for many of their graduates. We are delighted that the

- Durban University of Technology,
- The Walter Sisulu University,
- the Vaal University of Technology,
- the University of the Western Cape and
- the University of Pretoria

have grasped the opportunity to work with us in developing a broad curriculum, research, policy development and demonstration base for innovative work to better position the Nation in the Information Society and Knowledge economies.

We have a very serious job to do to make the Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) real and impactful and the collaborative space we are establishing with the e-Skills Knowledge production hubs and which will focus on e-skills delivery, research, policy development is an important contributor to this need.

The initial e-Skills Knowledge Production Hubs will be located at the five Universities (DUT, WSU, VUT, UWC and UP) that the e-Skills Institute has established Memoranda of understanding with to assist it in addressing the massive e-Skills deficit we face. Through the establishment of these Hubs, we will learn about how to collaborate across Business, Government, Education, Civil society (Including Labour), we will learn how to engage with the best in the world, we will provide spaces

where our best and brightest and the best and brightest in the world can find useful, engaged and sustainable homes for innovation, service delivery, policy development, praxis and evaluation in preparing our Nation for more equitable prosperity and global competitiveness in the emerging world of information societies and knowledge based economies.

Today we start this process in KZN with the Durban University of Technology. The Durban University of Technology has been working with the e-Skills Institute for more than 12 months on developing such a base. It is a very appropriate choice to be a part of this initiative not only because of its geographical location, but also because it has the commitment and understanding needed to make the e-Skills Knowledge Production Hub a collaborative reality.

Today is about launching the concept of the Provincial e-Skills Knowledge Hub in KZN. When we laid out the New Wave of Change for the Department of Communications on 19 November we specifically laid out priority areas for action of the next 12 months. One of these was Building a people centered and inclusive Information Society and Knowledge-Based economy. On the 22 November my colleague Deputy Minister Obed Bapela launched the e-Skills Knowledge Production hub concept for the Eastern Cape at East London on the 22 November and today on 13 December we are launching the concept for KZN.

It is about sharing the positioning, the focus and the roll out of the e-Skills Knowledge Production Hub here in KZN.

A priority for the Department of Communications is in actioning the e-Skills Institute (e-SI) as a catalytic collaborator and leader that

- **can harness existing capacity,**
- **find new capacity and**
- **engage all stakeholders in positioning our Nation for equitable prosperity and global competitiveness in the Information Society and Knowledge economies**
- **as well as improving our**
 - **service delivery,**
 - **increasing societal participation in building safer, vibrant, engaged and more self reliant communities.**

Friends, as we know there many committed people, many national and international agencies that want to help us in this task. What is missing is a sustainable network architecture

- that allows existing energy, skills and knowledge to be more effectively harnessed,
- that provides the space for new efforts to contribute in a collaborative manner across disciplines, stakeholder groups and interests
- that can develop new processes to measure the real impact of what we are doing in relation the MTSF, the African MDG's and the WSIS Plan of Action

The work that the e-Skills Institute has done to date and the strong message from the e-Skills Summit was the need for collaboration, coordination and building a place where all of the stakeholders can achieve more by working together.

This is what we are about.

Today starts the process of explanation, of engagement and of building commitment across all of the stakeholder groups involved in delivering e-skills to our nation to get the e-Skills Knowledge Production Hub established and operating in a collaborative and effective manner.

From our side I can assure you all that the Department of Communications sees this effort as a vital matter in dealing with the undeniable issues we have to face in e-Skilling our Nation for equitable prosperity and global competitiveness.

We welcome the interest, the commitment, the skills and the networks that Durban University of technology can bring to the table in helping us in this important task which is of vital interest to a Province such as the KZN.

I would also like to **recognise the commitment of others including CISCO, Telkom and the UNDP as well as groups such as ICDL, Siyafunda, and Smart Exchange** who have put their shoulders to the wheel in getting us to the position where we are now able to proceed with an initiative that has the potential to deliver so much and which is now being recognised as ground breaking in dealing with e-skills enhancement for underserved communities.

I thank you all for your interest and look forward to your active engagement in what we are commencing here today; the first step in establishing a Provincial e-Skills Knowledge Production Hub for KZN.

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