

AU Launches \$15 Million Project to Connect African Universities

By Michael Ouma and Brenda Zulu

The African Union has launched a US \$ 15 million project meant to provide cheap Internet connectivity to enhance collaboration in research between African and European universities.

The project, called Connect Africa, and scheduled to begin in March, is to be implemented under the EuroAfrica ICT partnership's cluster on science, innovation and ICT.

Ahmed Hamdy, AU's head of science, innovation and ICT says that the Connect Africa initiative is meant to enhance connectivity of African universities and those in Europe to encourage collaboration in research undertakings among people from the two continents.

The Connect Africa initiative is a result of the Africa-EU Joint Strategy and Plan of Action adopted at the EU-AU Summit held in Lisbon in 2007, which aims to enhance ICT research cooperation between sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and Europe. .

“The Connect Africa initiative is in realization of the fact that the speed of Internet connectivity in the continent is slow while the cost is high, leading many people to use about 50 per cent of their incomes on Internet access,” says Dr Hamdy.

To mitigate against the situation, says Hamdy, the Connect Africa project will lead to “the provision of high speed internet connection at low cost to enhance research work and enhance collaboration among researchers.”

The Connect Africa project is further meant to help bridge the scientific and digital divide, reduce poverty and ensure socio-economic development in the continent through the utilization of ICTs.

The Africa-EU Partnership for Science, Information Society and Space aims to support the development of an inclusive information society in Africa; support science and technology capacity building in Africa and helps in the implementation of Africa's science and technology plans of action.

Hamdy was speaking during the announcement of winners of the AU 2009 Continental Scientific Awards, held as a side event during the opening session of the 14th AU Summit being held in Addis Ababa.

The awards were won by Prof Diane Hildebrandt (Witwatersrand University) in the Basic Science innovation category and Prof Patrick George Eriksson (formerly of the University of KwaZulu Natal) in the Earth and Life Sciences category. Prof Hildebrandt said her award comes for her work in developing energy efficient process and equipment

with a view to reducing the current levels of carbon dioxide emissions from chemical processes. Prof Eriksson's research interests are in Precambrian sedimentation systems, particularly clastic sediments and how they have changed over Precambrian time, due to continental growth (also the freeboard concept), mantle plume activity, supercontinent amalgamation and dispersal, and how they relate to atmospheric-climate-hydrosphere changes.

Prof Eriksson said he supplied geologists to the global markets and was saddened by the brain drain as Africa has lost many scientists to other continents. He appealed to African Head of states to find a way of keeping them in Africa.

The awardees, both from South Africa, each received a cash prize of US \$ 100,000. Science and Technology is one of the key focal areas on Africa's development agenda. The Constitutive Act, establishing the African Union, recognizes the need to advance the development of Africa by promoting research in all fields, and in particular, in Science and Technology.

The African Union Commission (AUC) Chairperson Jean Ping said the objective of the award was to stimulate scientific research at national, regional and continental levels.

In January 2007, the AU Heads of State and Government "declared 2007 as the launching year for building constituencies and champions for science, technology and innovation in Africa".

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