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## Experts highlight challenges of e-learning in Africa

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Despite e-learning's potential to help meet Africa's educational and manpower needs, event speakers said that erratic power supplies, weak ICT infrastructure, poor educational funding and an absence of experts have combined to rob the continent of a vital chance at improving its stake in the digital economy.

ELearning Africa is the largest gathering of e-learning and distance education professionals on the continent, with more than 1,440 delegates from 83 countries attending this year's conference. Organized by ICWE in Berlin and Hoffmann & Reif Consultants, the event is hosted by a different African government each year. The Accra event was the third such conference, with Kenya and Ethiopia having each hosted previous editions.

"Many policy makers and other stake holders have come to appreciate the importance of e-learning to enhancing manpower development, [but] the required commitment with funding is still not there," said attendee Omowaiye Remi, ICT assistant to the vice chancellor at Ladokpe University of Technology in Nigeria. He explained that expensive bandwidth and unstable power supplies have forced many universities to shelve plans for e-learning.

Funding was also named as a major hurdle to deploying e-learning offerings. The yearly research grants for over 80 universities in Nigeria is often touted as being less than 10% of what one major university spends on a research project in a semester in the U.S.

"ICTs have already begun to exert massive transformation of education systems worldwide," said Canada's George Siemens of the University of Manitoba Learning Technologies Centre at the conference. "Canada's 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."

Kenya and Uganda have recorded limited but appreciable successes with e-learning windows. However, according to Isaac Olunfemi, vice president of the Nigerian Society of Engineers and a lecturer at Lagos State Polytechnic, Nigeria offers, perhaps, the worst example of the continent's inability to use technology to improve its educational system. Each year, nearly a million candidates apply for the limited

spaces in Nigerian universities, and less than 8% of applicants are ever admitted into the university system. The rest could be conveniently admitted if robust e-learning offerings were put in place, Olunfemi said.

Regrettably, the delegates agreed that the two-year-old comments of Josephine Ouédraogo, the UN Economic Commission's acting deputy executive secretary for Africa, still apply to the continent in 2008: "Unfortunately, the particular opportunities presented by ICT as a means for transforming the path of development through education remain largely untapped in Africa," Ouédraogo said at 2006's eLearning Africa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. "The key challenges facing Africa's quest for an e-learning environment are, among others, limited infrastructure [and] lack of experts and expertise to develop and support applications and systems within this new environment."

However, there may be hope. Nigeria is seeking to address its connectivity problem through the launch of its own communication satellite, Nigcomsat-1, designed to offer low-cost bandwidth. The pan-African satellite RascomQAF-1 was also launched last year to provide an affordable satellite backbone across the continent, and a number of terrestrial connectivity projects are being executed in several African countries. "These, hopefully, should help," said one Kenyan conference attendee. "But it will take some time."