

July 2005

African ICT institute launched

17 May 2005 was a significant day for the ICT industry ... it marked World Telecommunications Day and saw the launch of the Meraka Institute at the CSIR in Pretoria, an African Advanced Institute for information and Communications Technology (AIICT).

The Meraka Institute derives its mandate as a national strategic initiative from President Thabo Mbeki's 2002 State of the Nation Address, in which he announced the concept of a university for ICT. It will play a key role in equipping people with world-class ICT skills, while focusing on needs-based research programmes in conjunction with South African higher education institutions (HEIs). It will also contribute towards stimulating the development of the local ICT industry through its provision of intellectual and human capital. ('Meraka' is a Sesotho word meaning 'common grazing', which denotes sharing, mutual benefit and the potential for prosperity.)

"This Institute represents one of the steps taken by SA Government to address the important social and economic imperatives," said Dr Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri, Minister of Communications, during her keynote speech at the launch. "It represents an intervention aimed not only at addressing the needs of the first economy, but importantly also addressing the very real and pressing needs of the second economy. "The on-going process of technological and market convergence, the worldwide opening of the telecommunications sector, in particular, to full competition and the rapid growth of the Internet and on-line services, is leading to the creation of new market structures and new role for market players. These dynamics have created new challenges for the training and development and multi-skilling of new and existing participants in a highly volatile market environment. SA, in particular, has a shortage of newly skilled people and this country also has an opportunity to contribute skills development to the rest of the continent of Africa where needs, in many instances, are greater," she said.

The Institute – also known as the AIICT – will contribute to Government's drive to enhance both the scale and scope of research and development (R&D) in the sector and the impact of the R&D interventions through focused, needs-driven research in a number of key areas, such as Human Language Technologies and the High Performance Computing.

These efforts will be closely aligned with current initiatives and strategies such as the ICT Roadmap, the Advanced Manufacturing Technology Strategy and the Department of Science and



Technology's Frontier Science Programme. Working in close partnerships with HEIs, the Institute aims to create critical mass and concentrated national research and development efforts. In addition, the Institute envisages close partnering with international research and development players.

Current initiatives include:

- **Wireless Africa** – research into sustainable ICT for developing countries in order to close the digital divide that exists within and between developing countries.
- **Human Language Technologies (HLT)** enables people to get information and services, and to interact with technology, through language. The aim is to overcome barriers related to language, illiteracy or disability.
- **The National Accessibility Portal (NAP)** uses ICT to help empower persons with disabilities to live independently.
- **The Digital Doorway**, an initiative between the DST and the Meraka Institute, uses minimally invasive education for large-scale computer literacy. Communities can teach themselves to obtain functional computer skills, through having free, 24-hour access to a robust, freestanding computer terminal with motivating content.
- **Open Source** – this centre promotes understanding and the use of Free/Libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) in the public, private and civil sectors.
- **A Centre for High Performance Computing** is currently being formed in collaboration with HEIs. The aim is to provide high-end computing and expertise for research, including the sciences, medicine, engineering and social sciences.

For more information, contact Hilda van Rooyen, CSIR Group Communication, on hvrooyen@csir.co.za

