

R50m technology institute opened

About 98% of SA's IT investment is in imported technology: local innovation desperately needs a boost.

By ANA MONTEIRO

SCIENCE and Technology Deputy Minister Derek Hanekom says 98% of South Africa's investment in information communication technology (ICT) is going into imported technologies, and it's little wonder that there is a lack of innovation in SA.

"SA does not have strong research and development (R&D) capacity in ICT and, where there is significant innovation potential, results have been patchy," he said at the launch of a new research centre, been set up to address the problem.

To be known as the Meraka Institute (previously the African Advanced Institute for ICT), the centre was officially opened yesterday – World Telecommunications Day – by Communications Minister Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri.

President Thabo Mbeki, in his 2002 State of the Nation address, spoke of a university that would deal specifically with technology and innovation.

The Meraka Institute is the manifestation of Mbeki's idea; the concept of which was first approved by Cabinet in July 2002.

According to a statement issued to *Moneyweb*, the institute will focus on developing people (human capital) and the application of knowledge in the technology arena.

The institute's interim director, Dr Llew Jones, says this will be done through involving students – mostly at a post-graduate level – from universities and colleges in projects undertaken by the institute.

Projects will be aimed at finding solutions to uniquely African issues such as how to deploy e-government in areas where many are illiterate and giving people in remote areas access to education.

"We are trying to find ways to bridge the digital divide."

Department of Communications' Envir Fraser says the institute has been given an annual budget of about R50m, which comes largely from the budgets for the departments of communications and science and technology.

He says the private sector still needed to be engaged.

Located on the premises of the

Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in Pretoria, the institute has taken over two of the CSIR's units – human language technologies and open-source development. Because of this, Meraka already has a number of projects under its wing.

One of these is the Digital Doorway. Developed by a three-member team and funded by the Eskom Foundation and the department of science and technology, it comprises a protective metal console with four computer terminals (designed to withstand the elements), which provides children in remote communities with free, 24-hour access to a computer with educational programmes.

One of the developers said 25 of the units have been rolled out in poverty-stricken communities in the country, and more than 100 terminals are to be installed this year.

Another interesting project is OpenPhone, an open-source telephony platform that will provide multilingual voice services in all local languages, thus overcoming barriers related to language, illiteracy or disability.

Jones says technology exports and imports should be equally balanced. – ana@moneyweb.co.za

