

ZAMBIA: Universities call for improved connectivity

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Zambia's three public universities have put proposals before government for the installation of a framework to improve internet access and inter-connectivity between local and regional universities. They are also lobbying for a review of ICT policies that would among other things facilitate research and access to US and European library and digitised resources.

Last month the universities of Zambia, Copperbelt and Mulungushi used the Zambia Research and Education Network, or Zamren, an organisation they had formed, to submit their proposals to the authorities.

The proposals include installation of an inter-university fibre optic cable and expanding alternative means of providing higher education, in the form of information and communication technology (ICT) applications and e-learning.

The overall proposals are intended to improve the quality of learning, research and distance learning access, among other things.

A statement by Mulungushi University on 27 January said the project proposal drafted by the three universities as part of Zamren included 'last mile' optical fibre connectivity - a reference to the final leg of delivering connectivity from provider to customer. The proposal was submitted to the Communications Authority of Zambia at a meeting attended by all three vice-chancellors and their ICT directors.

The current e-learning proposals follow a **tender** titled ICT capacity building support to strengthen higher education and research in Zambia, issued by the three public universities. The tender proposal closed in November last year, with a recommendation that it be awarded to the **University of Groningen**, which in turn formed a consortium with **VU University Amsterdam, Utrecht University** and **Ubuntunet Alliance**.

Among the tender's stated objectives are implementing needs assessments and creating the necessary conditions for increased use of ICT, to improve the quality and efficiency of teaching and learning at Zambian higher education institutions; and improving the provision of ICT facilities, service delivery and training for academic, administration and management staff and students of Zamren member organisations.

In a speech last year after joining Zamren, Mulungushi Vice-chancellor Professor Vernon Chinene enumerated a number of benefits of the initiative.

In addition to allowing for increased access to library materials and digitised resources from European and American universities, the initiative will promote research collaboration by the three public universities and also curb examination paper leakages - a problem in Zambia.

"First, the installation and commissioning of the inter-university fibre optic cable will be a great milestone in facilitating e-learning in these public institutions. Lecturers would use this resource to create content, create assignments, and manage students interactively as well as mark student scripts. This is a real priority area," said Chinene.

He continued: "There is a need for tools that lecturers can use for setting up examination question papers safely to avoid leakages."

Chinene praised the flexibility that would come with improved connectivity: "The fibre connectivity will greatly add value in that course materials will be available to the students just at a click of a button. The materials will be available all the time for free downloading by authorised students."

He said there will be a lot of value addition in the provision of various options for content, which will be packaged in three forms: text (PDF), audio and video.

The vice-chancellor pointed out that students who miss a lecture will no longer have to worry because the video lecture would still be available to them. "This kind of flexibility will greatly enhance the potential of education and national development," he said.