

Education decision a wake up call

The Cape Chamber believes that the decision by the Department of Basic Education is indicative of the deteriorating state of ICT education and a wake up call to industry to urgently intervene.



The Digital Portfolio Committee of the Cape Chamber of Commerce and Industry held a meeting recently to discuss the decision by the Department of Basic Education to standardise software tools and assessments for Computer Application Technology (CAT) and Information Technology (IT). The group which participated in the discussion represented small businesses, educational institutions, professionals and ICT practitioners including software developers.

There was a strong consensus that the decisions made by the Department of Basic Education would have negative ramifications and the Portfolio Committee has taken a decision to further lobby for the decision to be re-evaluated and if possible reversed.

Key concerns

Key concerns raised by group included: the lack of industry consultation; the unintended consequences of the decision, not least of which is the anti-competitive nature of the decision and how this benefits two large US corporations at the expense of others; the fact that this move is in direct conflict with the existing FOSS policy; and the concern that this decision will relegate our learners to a future of global irrelevance in the marketplace.

The first part of the discussions focused on the decision to standardise on Microsoft Office for CAT and the second part, on the exclusive use of Delphi for assessments in IT. The issue was far more than just about the government policy to use Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) but also about the implications of the decision with regard to marketable skills and the country's ability to be globally competitive.

Concerns were raised about the process and whether commercial implications of choosing commercial software on an exclusive basis meant that this should have been dealt with as an open tender rather than an internal departmental decision on standardisation.

The committee and group participants decided on five action points which included a paper to be produced within the month as a means of lobbying for re-evaluation of the decision at a national level. The paper would need to articulate the

issues and provide alternatives and solutions in a balanced and objective way.

"Standardisation on one technology or programming language for education and assessment in computing and software skills is problematic. It is much like trying to study medicine based on the kidney as the only part of the human anatomy," says Roderick Lim Banda, Chair of the Digital Portfolio Committee for the Cape Chamber of Commerce and Industry. "If the issue is a lack of teachers and resources or the need for standardising teaching and assessments, we feel that there are alternatives."

Overall, the group of participants were keen to contribute towards finding alternatives and felt that there should have been wider consultation and agreed that the second priority would be to work with other stakeholder groups and communities including industry organisations, parents and teachers.

A shift in mindset is needed

The committee also agreed to develop a set of guidelines which it would circulate to members and other businesses to create awareness of the issues and for commerce and industry to take the lead in assessing computing skills as the benchmark for educators.

It was pointed out by representatives in education that there needs to be a shift in mindset from creating end-users or consumers of technology to teaching learners to be producers and developers of technology solutions. To this end, the committee has decided to work on engaging educational bodies such as the Department of Basic Education and to get the side of educators on the challenges they face.

As a final point, the participants who were attorneys or had legal and policy backgrounds have committed to assist to look at the issue further from a legal and process perspective. As Paul Esselaar, the Vice Chair pointed out, "The general sense of the discussion was that the matter was too important to leave as is and that steps will be taken to ensure that businesses have a voice in the re-evaluation of the decisions made."

The committee would like to see an open approach taken that would allow for a diversity of technologies and opportunities to create highly skilled and employable youths. It does recognise that government and educators cannot do this alone and that the business community must play its part.

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