MirandaNet International Teachers Fellowship Launched In Zimbabwe.

We are in the information age, where those with information become leaders while those without become laggards. The age is dominated by the digital technology and is fast influencing all aspects of human life. In this global village, there is no doubt that real literacy includes being computer literate. It was not without good reason that President Robert Mugabe has endeavoured to source and distribute computers to schools. We need to applaud the efforts. Recently the Minister of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), Nelson Chamisa announced that Zimbabwe was on the verge of becoming an “information tiger of the continent.” This announcement followed the commencement of the laying of an optic fibre link connecting Zimbabwe to the Beira under-sea cable, putting the nation several strides in the right direction. Expectations were high in Zimbabwe following news that the landlocked Southern African state was on the verge of being wired to the rest of the world through an undersea cable. The Mister of Finance, Tendai Biti, has been operating a policy of duty-free ICT imports, while the Minister of Education, David Coltart, has expressed his interest in pursuing a viable ICT policy for schools. This writer has his doubts that there could be somewhere where this news has been applauded and implications debated more than it was done on the MirandaNet-Zimbabwe online platform, which was launched recently.

The MirandaNet community consists of teachers and academics as practitioners who are excited about developments in educational technology. A pun on "leading edge." It implies that using the latest technology is often risky because it has not been tested with enough users and may not perform as expected. Introducing an advanced product or service is also risky because the user community may not be ready for it or really want  It was established in 1992 as an international fellowship of educators who have been using ICTs to change their teaching and learning practice and to develop innovative models for [continuing professional development](http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Continuing+Professional+Development) **CPD** is the means by which members of professional associations maintain, improve and broaden their knowledge and skills and develop the personal qualities required in their professional lives. . It exists in more than 70 countries worldwide. The Zimbabwe Chapter was born in 2010 and provides an innovative and inclusive forum for educational technology enthusiasts in Zimbabwe. This is achieved through [peer mentoring](http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Peer+mentoring) **Peer Mentoring** is a form of mentoring that takes place in learning environments such as schools, usually between an older more experienced student and a new student(s). Peer Mentors should not be confused with prefects.  and action research strategies. [Underpinning](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/underpinning)un·der·pin·ning    
*n.*  
**1.** Material or masonry used to support a structure, such as a wall.  
  
**2.** A support or foundation. Often used in the plural.  
  
**3.** *Informal* The human legs. Often used in the plural.   
**.....** **Click the link for more information.** the research and evaluation is ongoing discussion. This supports good practice and the sharing of enabling strategies. The first of such discussions to be taken on board was on the issue of the Optic Fibre link from Beira. It read as follows:

*With our country described as being located in a technological desert   
(*[*http://www.odedra-straub.com/publications/28-Sub-Saharan.pdf*](http://www.odedra-straub.com/publications/28-Sub-Saharan.pdf)*), the news about the new optic fibre cable must come as a huge source of relief to ICT   
enthusiasts in the country. One of the goals of MirandaNet is to bridge the   
digital divide that exists between countries. What are your thoughts on the new   
developments, namely the new optic fibre cable and MirandaNet coming to   
Zimbabwe. What part should educational practitioners play in promoting the use   
of ICT and what challenges are they likely to face in a situation like ours?*

There was obvious excitement about the development and the educators look poised to take advantage of the opportunities created. Participants in this discussion praised the government for its commitment to developing ICT in the country. They were unanimous in predicting major strides in education as a result of improved ICT infrastructure. There are those like the writer who, while subscribing to the great potential use of ICT ushered in by the high bandwidth, need to see more done in terms of developing the relevant skills by the educators to maximize usage of the facility. Yes a lot of expectation has been cast, and justifiably so. The writer however has doubts as to whether the new facility can quickly and easily translate to increased performance and usage by people in Zimbabwe, especially students. There is much more than infrastructure that needs to be provided.

The writer had the opportunity to carry out a survey of middle managers’ computer skills by administering a questionnaire on a group of over 80 middle level managers who work in various organizations and therefore represented many sectors of Zimbabwe. The purpose of the survey was to assess the extent of the use of Internet applications. Results obtained showed that 90% had computers in their organizations and the majority of these were used for mere Word Processing; 50% were connected to some network (usually an intranet); 30% had not created own email addresses and 82% had not transacted in any form of e-business. The conclusion that the writer came up with is that training is necessary for the greater part of our citizenry before the country could realize full potential of this facility. The way forward for institutions of learning is also to take up community engagement/education especially in the use of computer mediated networks. Also in a report by EKOWISA’s executive director (Margaret Zunguze), it is clear that there is need to focus on people, not just technologies and on what people can do with technology: that is the truth we cannot run away from. Put simply, Zimbabwe needs to teach people how to use computers. We are happy that we have a forum like this where we can discuss these issues and try to make a difference.

The merits of using the Internet are probably best demonstrated by the vast wealth of up-to-date information at learners’ disposal. There is also the way the internet has overcome obstacles imposed by distance and time. Messages that used to take ages to reach their destinations on the other side of the globe are transmitted in a matter of seconds at the click of the mouse and people can speak to each other face-to-face in real time through podcasts. These are only a few of the advantages and there is no way they can be down-played. The only thing that can be done is to deal with each challenge as it comes to reduce its negative effect as much as possible. Each problem has its own solution and these solutions should be applied so that people can proceed with improving the quality of education and their lives in general through technology.

The consolation that we have is that with time we may be able to catch up with the rest of the world. It depends on what we do now to speed up the process of assimilating the Internet culture. What cannot be disputed is the fact that schools and teachers will play a pivotal role in determining the speed with which change is effected, which is why any discussion of progress in the area of ICT is incomplete without the mention of teachers and education. The first major goal that we have is therefore to ensure that the teachers themselves acquire ICT skills, which is a mammoth task given the fact that at present few teachers have the requisite skills. This was implied by Minister Chamisa's comment when he suggested that we need to make up for decades of missed opportunities.

Rather than allow this depressing state of affairs to extinguish our hope of becoming a digitally well-oiled country, we should muster all our resources and forge ahead with the task of improving our country. We need to raise awareness among our colleagues because this is not a task for a handful of people. We need an army of enthusiasts to complement the government's efforts to realize success in this area. We need to come up with ideas that will impart skills to teachers and lecturers.

This is why MirandaNet has launched a chapter in Zimbabwe. One of the strengths that MirandaNet has is its experience in International Outreach. Our voice is being heard. MirandaNet Zimbabwe membership is fully convinced that this development will translate into increased access to reading materials by our teachers and students, improved pass rates, quality graduates and reduced costs of communication for our institutions

The first MirandaNet-Zimbabwe chapter discussion came up with the following recommendations: The momentum generated by the president when he launched the Presidential Computerization Programme which donated ten computers per school to nearly all the secondary schools in the country in 2010 should be continued. The ministries of education should encourage their institutions to take advantage of the fibre-optic back-bone that has been laid. The minister of finance, where possible, should add more resources to fund and extend his assistance to expedite connectivity. The minister if ICT should spearhead connectivity, especially in rural areas so that they do not lack basic access to the Internet and related services and applications. One way of creating a platform for in-depth deliberations on how universal access can be achieved is through public-private partnerships. Industry and commerce should partner with educational institutions to initiate and sponsor these ICT projects and services.

Membership to MirandaNet-Zimbabwe is available and free to all interested comrades in the education sector, but we also welcome support from members representing companies and educational industries. We are always pleased to welcome new members to MirandaNet. There are different levels of membership such as ordinary membership, fellow and senior fellow. For educationists all we ask is that you are an ICT enthusiast and that you have an email address and regular access to the internet. Our activities include online discussions on Zimbabwe’s educational technology developments, international online and podcast discussions, invitations to international conferences and partnerships with international fellows to run projects in Zimbabwe. Future face-to-face conferences are having not been planned at this stage but cannot be ruled out. To find out more about MirandaNet visit [www.mirandanet.ac.uk](http://www.mirandanet.ac.uk). To join, visit [www.mirandanet.ac.uk/fellowship/join.htm](http://www.mirandanet.ac.uk/fellowship/join.htm)

This is not the first time that MirandaNet is making a contribution to ICT in Zimbabwe. Its first ever contribution was last year when David Jordan, a UK MirandaNet fellow, started a Sub Saharan African Connecting Classrooms project with three schools in Masvingo District: (Copota) or the M. Hugo School for the Blind; Bere secondary School, and Shonganiso School. The project is now in its second year, and three more schools have joined the project. The latest development involves MirandaNet on a much bigger scale.

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