SPEECH

BY

DR. TJAMA TJIVIKUA
RECTOR: POLYTECHNIC OF NAMIBIA

ON THE OCCASION OF THE LAUNCH OF THE POLYTECHNIC'S STUDENT LAPTOP INITIATIVE

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WINDHOEK

Director of Ceremonies, Mr. Laurent Evrard

Honourable Joel Kaapanda, Minister of Information and Communication Technology

SRC President, Mr. Forbes

Dear Polytechnic colleagues and students

Members of the media

Ladies and gentlemen

I would like to welcome you all to the launch of the Polytechnic's Student Laptop Initiative. Allow me to extend a particularly warm welcome to the Minister of ICT, the Honourable Joel Kaapanda, who has been like the proverbial quiet storm, almost unobtrusively driving and steering developments in the ICT sector in Namibia. Honourable Minister, the Polytechnic is grateful that you've once again found time in your busy schedule to support one of its keystone initiatives. The same gratitude is extended to our dear friends from the media.

In the modern, globalised world in which Namibia seeks to compete, technology is ever-evolving and new inventions and innovations are being introduced every day. The same applies to our working environment. What we learn today is almost guaranteed to be outdated by tomorrow in its current form. Equally, information, practices, ideas, and solutions that were relevant and fresh a year or two ago, are quite likely to have passed their "sell-by" date in a year or two. And if we do not keep pace with new developments, we are sure to be relegated to history.

On this point, I would like to refer you to Jared Diamond's book titled *"Collapse: How Societies Choose for Fall or Succeed"*[i]. Here we are given a litany of evidence of how history has punished those societies that did not have a vision for the future or has rewarded those that had a vision and lived on to innovate. Such was the thinking a decade ago about the worldwide web, and some five years ago when the world descended on Tunis some four years ago during the WSIS (World Information Society) conference which I attended. At that time the One Laptop per Child initiative was a brand-new concept to benefit millions of learners worldwide.

Concerning transformations, you are in the game or starting the game and you will be rewarded with development, or you are out of the game and you are relegated to an unpleasant history. This is why *Vision 2030* commits Namibia to a transformation into a knowledge economy.

In this cauldron of change, our competitiveness - whether as individuals in our chosen careers, or as a nation on the global economic stage - depends on the adoption of a radical new mindset. **First**, we must abandon the notion that three, four or even five years at university and mastery of its curriculum is sufficient preparation for a career or profession. **Secondly**, we need to commit to fostering a culture of innovation and to building a core of knowledge workers. Knowledge workers are universally recognized as the foundation or the keystone of national economic development and global competitiveness.

Ladies and gentlemen,

**The computer and associated technology developments, such as software applications and the Internet, have forever changed the way we live, work and learn. And so we can't talk about *knowledge economy* or *knowledge workers* without talking about modern information communication technology, at the very heart of which lie *computers.*

Amongst a myriad of applications,

a. they aid industrial processes and medical advances;

b. they land loaded passenger aircraft in the dark and spacecraft on the moon;

c. they perform mathematical calculations and construct complicated abstract models in seconds;

d. they design bridges, dams and skyscrapers, calculating tolerances and stress limits within a fraction of the time it used to take engineers doing it all manually only a few years ago;

e. they allow virtual face-to-face communications between people thousands of kilometers from each other for the cost of a local phone call;

f. they allow virtual shopping, ship and trading from just about anywhere;

g. they allow us to safely store and instantly retrieve, share and forward more documents, pictures and music, in digital format, on a little laptop computer than the biggest warehouse can hold in their original form. And then, of course, there is the communication revolution brought about by virtual social networks.

The list is endless, as you know, so please allow me to turn for a few minutes to the *transformational and catalytic role* computers and their associated technology can and have played in modern higher education settings all over the world.

Where properly harnessed, computer technology has raised standards of teaching and learning remarkably, in terms of efficiency as well as effectiveness. It offers students a vastly improved convenience and flexibility of access to electronic class notes, study guides, electronic library resources, and even digitally recorded and streamed lectures. It is also an unrivalled gateway to online or offline interaction with lecturers, study groups; individual class-mates, or fellow-scholars or subject experts all over the world (through sites such as blogs, virtual discussion forums, chat-rooms, etc). You will shortly be able to view some of these benefits first-hand, when staff members from the Polytechnic's Bureau of Computer Services demonstrate the capabilities of the student laptop solution being launched here today.

In terms of learning and research, modern computer-based resources systems also offer supreme benefits. Students in search of information in the pre-digital era had to physically visit a library for reference books and journals, and then hope that a copy was available on its shelves when they got there. Today, students at leading educational institutions such as the Polytechnic have vast collections of virtual resources right at their fingertips - the keyboards of their computers. For example, we now have 110 000 e-journals and additional 16 000 e-books and many other academic resources available through our main library here at the Polytechnic.

A few clicks are all it takes them to gain access to and or/download the latest e-books, electronic versions of specialist journals and periodicals, up-to-date research reports and reviews, etc. Polytechnic students generally have access to thousands of academic publications - journals, periodicals, etc. from any convenient location with internet connectivity, thanks to the Poly's e-subscriptions of more than a million Namibian dollars each year. Backing up this investment are advanced servers and a high-tech wi-fi computer network that will soon offer wireless connectivity across almost the entire campus and at all Polytechnic regional centres throughout Namibia.

As a standard-bearer of technology and knowledge-creation in Namibia, the Polytechnic has always been an early adopter of innovation and cutting-edge technology. This is reflected in the state-of-the-art computer systems we have always tried to employ in our teaching and learning processes and their supporting infrastructure, as well as in institutional administrative processes such as online registration. We believe this strategy has played no small part in the administrative efficiencies we've achieved, the good progress of our students at large, and our graduates' popularity in the market place in particular.

Our commitment in this regard is also reflected in the fact that the Polytechnic achieved a remarkable student:computer ratio of 7:1 about 5 years ago; today it that ratio stands at 5:1. In the interim, computer-assisted teaching and learning has really taken off at the Polytechnic. This is evident in the unprecedented demand for seats at computer workstations in the library, in the internet café, and in various computer laboratories all over campus.

But this is something that the Polytechnic foresaw, together with the enormous costs of trying to provide additional, and static, computer workstations to try and keep up with the growing demand. Thus, when we drafted the third **Five-Year Polytechnic Strategic Plan (PSP)** three years ago, one of our stated objectives was to **equip 60% of our students with their own laptops by 2013**. The student laptop initiative which we are officially launching today is the first major step towards this ambitious objective.

The benefits of this alternative are obvious: For the institution - higher academic performance of its students, better preparedness for the demands of the knowledge economy, and, of course, considerable savings on building and equipping more computer laboratories and workstations. For the students: improved learning and research with optimal convenience; improved information literacy and therefore enhanced preparedness for the demands of the knowledge economy; and ownership of a laptop that can continue to serve the student beyond graduation. Already, about 1 000 students own laptops, and as I walk around campus I can see how they are connected. The cost of education is not cheap, and seen by some people as outrageous, but it is one of the best investments any student can make in their lifetime! Get a laptop today and get connected. It is the lifestyle of today and tomorrow.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year, the Polytechnic will make available up to 1 000 laptops at a cost of almost N\$4.5 million as the first phase of this ground-breaking initiative.

Thanks to the power of direct purchasing and the goodwill of our suppliers, Pinnacle Computers, the laptop initiative offers our students a top quality product with premium specifications at a selling price 30% to 40% below the retail price of technically comparable products.

The cost of only N$4 600 includes an unrivalled bundle of additional benefits. These include a three-year hardware warranty; on-campus software support at very affordable rates; a vast range of open-source academic software downloadable almost instantly from the Polytechnic server; and unlimited wireless connectivity at all regional centres and from almost anywhere on the Windhoek campus - TOTALLY FREE OF CHARGE, and subject only to our network usage policies.

The laptop project will provide a lot of flexibility to students, both on and off campus. They will be able to do research, complete assignments and browse the Internet even when the internet café, library or computer laboratories are closed. Off-campus, students will still be able to connect to the Polytechnic's online and dedicated e-learning resources, thanks to commercially available Internet connectivity solutions. One option is the 3G device and data package that MTC is so kindly making available to our students at an excellent, highly discounted price.

Honourable Minister,

A potential benefit of this initiative not to be overlooked is the impact the project could have on IT literacy rate in the country as well as Namibia's per capita computer access rate. Currently 90% of Namibians do not use the Internet in their households and only about 3.3% of the households have working Internet connections.[ii]

If the project achieves its target of equipping about 6 000 students with their own laptops by 2013, up to 36 000 members in their households could potentially also benefit from the acquisition, based on an average household size of up to seven people in Namibia!

As the trend-setter in the areas of innovation, entrepreneurship, science and technology in Namibian education, the Polytechnic accepts that trend-setting often involves bearing the brunt of teething troubles and other early-adoption penalties. It is, however, our sincere hope that this initiative will be replicated in other educational institutions.

For this initiative to realise its full potential, though, we need the support of Government and other sponsors of students. Laptops are sold on credit only to students whose bursary or loan sponsors guarantee payment - all other buyers must pay cash. It is my hope that the Government - and perhaps even private financial institutions - will consider making funding available on concessionary terms to non-bursary or loan holders who would not otherwise be able to afford buying their own laptop. This invitation does, however, not apply to loan sharks!

I thank you.

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[i] J. Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies choose to fall or succeed*, 2011.
[ii] www.misanamibia.org.na (accessed 01 March 2011)