

Seventy million children still in need of UPE

In spite of significant progress, there are nearly 70 million children at any one time who do not enjoy Millennium Development Goal 2: a primary school education. Although 89% of children in the developing world are enrolled in primary education according to current UN estimates for MDG-2, some regions – in particular, countries in sub-Saharan Africa - will see a drop-out rate of up to 30% before final grade. And demand from those who continue is now putting a pressure point on the next step in the system – secondary education. Cue broadband, a potential tipping point for a mass introduction of e-education in developing and developed countries everywhere.

Existing and planned broadband networks can deliver information, interactivity, shared resources and a level playing field to everyone. The European Commission reports broadband is already nearly a mainstay requirement for school education in European Union.

Online education is easing the resource bottleneck in training teachers; ITU/UNESCO estimates published in the World Telecommunication Development Report 2010 suggest that as many as 10 million additional teachers will be needed globally by the 2015 MDG deadline. Some countries have been actively pursuing an intensive programme of teacher training online: at the WSIS Forum 2010 organized by the ITU, Egyptian deputy minister of communications Dr Hoda Baraka stated that her country had already trained 60,000 teachers online in 2008.

Elsewhere, ITU itself has already pump-primed the process in developing resources and public-private partnerships for broadband-based schools that will outreach to their communities, through its Connect a School, Connect a Community initiative.

Designed not only for students but also for the communities in which they live, smart policies and innovative public-private partnerships promoting school-based community ICT centres represent an attractive, affordable and scalable step forward in addressing the digital divide, says ITU Secretary General, Dr. Hamadoun Touré. His rationale is clear: "Young people adapt easily

to ICTs, and schools have always been the natural hub of a community, so where better to invest in connectivity? A connected school can provide access for a whole community.”

M + E = Me-Learning

Around the world, m-learning – as well as e-learning - on broadband is already appearing in various guises. “There is nothing more important than assuring that today’s young people have the education and skills to be productive global citizens in the 21st century,” says Jeffrey Sachs, Broadband Commissioner and Director of The Earth Institute, which recently partnered with Ericsson in a major new project called Connect to Learn. Ericsson CEO and President, Hans Vestberg, a fellow Broadband Commissioner, says, “It’s time for the classroom to go global and go mobile, since mobile networks have started to surpass fixed in many parts of the world.” Mr Vestberg suggests that in addition to simple lesson delivery, interactive discussion, social networking, curriculum design and implementation are also already possible – and valuable.

Mobile phones offer advantages of being already in millions of hands in the developing world, with relatively well deployed and stable network infrastructures. Many schools that have been using TV and radio systems are now switching to online because of its inherent interactivity. Some already blend educational methods between SMS and classroom TV. Other projects in South Africa point to the future and demonstrate most educational materials can already be deployed on 3G-enabled phones to deliver maths education and sophisticated in-service teacher training.