GOVERNMENT clearly recognises that South Africa faces a very serious issue around skilling itself for a sustainable place in today's world and this can only happen if we focus on what is also needed in tomorrow's world, says Minister of Communication Radhakrishna L Padayachie (Roy) MP.

"In this quest we must face some uncomfortable truths if we are to be successful and if we are to provide the base for increasing prosperous equity in our society and positioning ourselves for global competitiveness," he says.

"The first uncomfortable truth is that despite all of our best efforts in government service delivery and the commitment of many skilful and dedicated people right across our government departments at the national, provincial and local levels – and despite some very significant gains in some areas – the problem we face in skilling our people for tomorrow's world is not getting any smaller. So we need to find smarter ways, creative ways and innovative ways to address this important task.

"The second uncomfortable truth is that the advent of Information Technology and its development which is occurring at breakneck speed has changed the way of the world. No matter how remote our place in the world is, we simply cannot be removed from the impact of modern information technologies.

"Further ICT is changing the positioning of economies right around the world and those that do not have good solid plans to deal with this will simply fall behind and their world will continue to be impoverished.

"We see the stark reality of Kenya (the ancestral home of the current President of the United States, Barak Obama) which just some 20 years ago had the same GDP as South Korea – which is now arguably one of the leading IT nations in the world.

"Many of us can still remember 1990 (21 years ago) like it was yesterday, so the realisation of position change in this new world is a tangible thing.

"Another uncomfortable truth is that South Africa has been dropping down the global ranking for e-readiness.

"This is not because we are not progressing or that our programs are not working but simply because the others are moving faster than we are. As we know, these rankings take time to compile and it is difficult to determine in a day by day time frame just how we are going.

"Government has recognised the importance of these uncomfortable truths and we recognise that although of ICT is going at breakneck speed and we are working hard to get modern infrastructure in place; but as we know the new technology will be largely mobile.

"South Africans right across our nation have recognised this for some time and we have one of the highest penetrations of cellphones anywhere on the continent. But this is just one side of the equation. The other side is about how do we proactively make best use of the new technology to improve people's life chances and living environments in their personal lives, their work opportunities, their communities and their governance.

"e-Skilling our nation so that we are all better prepared to make effective use of the technology to improve equitable prosperity and global competitiveness is a high priority of the Department of Communications.

"The government has recognised that this is a complex business operating right across the breadth and depth of our socio-economic frameworks and that it cannot be addressed without the involvement of all stakeholder groups.

Over the past few months, the e-Skills Institute which has been tasked to address this matter has been involved in a wide consultation process with all stakeholder groups within the country and with collaborative organisations and countries across the world.

"This effort which culminated in the first South African e-skills Summit attended by more than 300 Thought Leaders from South Africa and around the world held in July last year has now laid out the basis for us to take a new collaborative approach to dealing with our very large e-skills deficit and in positioning South Africa into a leadership role in this space.

"The National e-skills Summit process has produced the first National e-skills National Plan of Action (NeSPA 2010) as a working document to align efforts of all stakeholder groups to the Medium Term Strategic Framework.

The central recommendation of the NeSPA was the establishment of independent e-skills

e-Skills training essential for our future prosperity

Radhakrishna L Padayachie (Roy) MP, the Minister of Communications

Knowledge Production Hubs in each Province to coordinate effort at the local level addressing real needs with the energy, knowledge, networks and commitment of all key stakeholders and to develop relevant curricula and training as well as establishing a sound basis for innovative research and evaluation tied to the MTSF and which provides us with substance to develop relevant policy that all of us can relate to and own.

It also tests new approaches, and provides places for the best brains from academia, business, government and civil society from right across the world to come and be a part of us developing solutions and innovative approaches relevant to the concept of a developmental state.

The initial hubs are located at the five Universities that the e-Skills Institute has established Memoranda of Understanding with to assist it in addressing the massive e-skills deficit we face. These include the Durban University of Technology, The University of Pretoria, the University of the Western Cape, the Vaal University of Technology and the Walter Sisulu University. The Department of Communications has established the e-Skills Institute as a national catalytic organisation to bring together the current disjointed efforts around e-skills and the key recommendations of the National e-skills Summit of 2010.

Newly appointed Director General Rosey Sekese says the flagship project confirms that South Africa is on a positive footing to leapfrog up the e-readiness ladder.

She acknowledges that the country has dropped in the global ranking for e-readiness but cautions that these take time to compile and often reflect three years past. "The simple reality is that we cannot continue to react to these things in retrospect – that is just a losing game so we must be proactive in this new world of change."

The latest report on the Development of the Information Society by the International Telecommunication Union indicated that out of 158 countries South Africa has fallen from 70th place (2005) to 80th (2007).

Key indicators are the use of the ICTs and skills development which contribute 60 percent to the Development Index.

Given the falling ranking on the global e-readiness indicators and local industry demands and the general lack of e-skills in the country, the DoC sees this as a real impediment to meet South Africa's commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the World Summit on Information Society goals (WSIS, 2005) and the Medium Term Strategic Framework 2009 -2014.

As a result the Department of Communications has set itself a target of being "A Global Leader in the Development and use of ICT's for socio-economic development and betterment of People's lives" that can only be achieved through building of a people-centered inclusive Information Society and Knowledge-based Economy.

A national programme is urgently required to achieve a rapid large scale improvement in the supply of those e-skills for which there is a genuine need. It must therefore support the goals of the Department of Communications, Department of Higher Education and Training's National Skills Development Strategy 2010, the Diagnostic Report 2011 of the National Planning Commission, the Medium Term

Strategic Framework (2009 – 2014) and Millennium Development Goals. It needs also to reflect essential understanding of how to use those skills optimally within the various contexts.

There is a possibility that highly skilled people may return to South Africa as the current global financial position worsens. This is an opportunity to use these people to address the shortage of educators, trainers and leaders in this initiative and to assist in revitalizing ICT education and training.

A great deal of money is already being invested in ICT education and training by business, academia, government and civil society.

Currently, the provision of e-skills is delivered by a range of uncoordinated efforts across education, government, business and civil society funded by private service provider models, government support contributory schemes, donor agency supported free access schemes.

It is essential that any proposal for an entirely new institution that will strive to be a key catalyst, facilitator and responsive change agent in the development of South Africa within the globally evolving information and knowledge based environment be supported by clear and objective arguments.

The Department of Communications is currently incubating the e-Skills Institute which will evolve into an independent agency over time.

HUBS are the key

AS partnering universities, the Walter Sisulu University, the Durban University of Technology (DUT), the Vaal University of the Technology, University of the Western Cape and the University of Pretoria have been working with the e-Skills Institute over the past few months in addressing the massive e-skills deficit of the country and will continue to do so through the establishment of provincial e-skills knowledge production and coordination hubs.

As Minister of Communications, Radhakrishna L Padayachie (Roy) says, it is a very appropriate choice for these institutions of higher education to be a part of this national initiative, given the socio economic population they serve and their commitment and understanding to make the provincial e-skills Knowledge Production and Coordination Hubs a collaborative reality in the provinces.

Work is already underway in the five provinces in building a collaborative network architecture that allows e-skilling interventions within each province to better align to the local and national strategic objectives, MDGs and the WSIS Plan of Action.

A core function of the provincial hubs will be to define the e-skills gaps, and where possible create new offerings across organisational boundaries. For instance the work in progress at the University of the Western Cape, where through a multi-stakeholder collaborative approach embarked on an e-inclusion and social innovative programme with the Provincial Government of the Western Cape, the City of Cape Town, USAASA, Department of Rural Development, South African Post Office, ICDL, CISCO and Telecentre.org developed and is in the process of delivering the first e-skills for e-centre manager course offered to e-centre managers.

The aim is to build local ICT champions within the communities to increase the application of ICT to improve the livelihoods of the local community.

The Eastern Cape e-skills Knowledge Production & Co-ordination hub established at the University of Walter Sisulu sees the low levels of e-skills among learners and educators in the FET colleges and the lack of employment readiness a major challenge.

In partnership with the Department of Higher Education, Telkom, Cisco, ICDL, USAASA and Research in Motion a project aimed at capacitating these FET ICT lecturers has recently been launched.

The project will focus on the curriculum, research and innovation i.e. the use of technology to better support the learning and teaching environment. A second core function of the hub is to coordinate all e-skills activities at a provincial level.

This function includes determining existing programmes, projects and service delivery of e-skills related activities across all stakeholder groups; conducting a gap analysis to address future needs in relation to the National e-skills Plan of Action 2011, MTSF and MDGs; and to identify local needs, overlap, gaps and collaborations.

Provincial environmental scans are currently being performed by each of the hubs and is already starting to shape the local e-skills agenda for each of the provinces. For example the Vaal University of Technology, focusing on the Northern Cape and Southern Gauteng regions sees as one of its points of departure, the mobilisation of the broader population – including the unemployed, low income levels (44 percent less that R10 per day) and broad community structures into the socio-economic mainstream to make them competitive, employable, entrepreneurial and self sustaining.

The University of Pretoria, Gauteng e-Skills Knowledge Production and Coordination hub is focusing on Creative Industry with a pilot project aimed at e-entrepreneurship.

Given its many e-skills activities, the Durban University of Technology is focusing on "Smart Connected Communities" – with the aim of effective service delivery at a local and provincial level supported by an appropriate access model.

A key partner for the hub is that of Smart Exchange, currently responsible for growing the ICT Sector in the region.

Overall the e-Skills Institute and its collaborative partners is committed to the development of the country and will continue its plight to increase the e-skills capacity of the country be it for business development, effective service delivery, employment readiness and socio economic development.

Technology is the way of our nation's future

THERE is universal agreement about the importance of technology and knowledge for the economy of the country and a realisation that in future an increasingly large portion of the population will require these skills as the nature of work changes and technology is used to access information and services in almost every aspect of everyday life, the Department of Communications (DoC) points out.

And as its Deputy Director General Dr, Harold Wesso responsible for the eSkills Institute points out, jobs can be created at a variety of skills levels from call centres to development of highly sophisticated software and electronic devices and in various contexts such as business, government, education and civil society that are suitable for people of different abilities and interests.

The DoC points out that even during an economic downturn, as is challenging all economies at present, investment in developing the ICT skills education and training infrastructure and an efficient and effective skills development process is important as digital products can be exported very easily.

And this industry is not dependent on a few major, government sponsored projects with a defined development life cycle, as in the case of the construction of roads and buildings.

In an executive summary the DoC points out that e- skills development stimulates the use of ICT products and hence expands (the virtuous cycle) in addition to updating skills among the lecturers, teachers and trainers is an ongoing and longterm need in secondary schools, FET colleges, universities and in private colleges cannot wait for better times before this process is started.

ICT training (including refresher courses and introduction to new technology, courses for managers, courses relating to specific methodologies and to specific products) for existing employees as well as for new staff can assist currently inefficient businesses to become more profitable, and to improve service levels – particularly in public organisations and SMMEs.

In essence, future job creation depends on current skills development. The e-skills agenda is a multi-disciplinary approach that goes beyond mere technology training and involves a broad spectrum of competency, needs and delivery options for an Information Society and Knowledge Economy.

More and more e-skills are becoming central to the development of jobs in Information Societies and Knowledge -based Economies and refers to the ability of people to use and create all forms of ICTS to adequately improve their life opportunities in their personal and learning environment, their cultural expression, social engagement and participating in the economy.

Thus the establishment of the e-Skills Institute as a key national catalytic collaborator in e-skilling the nation in relation to employment readiness; effective e-governance and service delivery; business development; socio-economic development; and; research and development is critical in the development of South Africa.

The e-Skills Institute will lead the creation and implementation of e-skills interventions including that of research, monitoring and evaluation, and innovation to benefit the socio-economic position of the total population.

It will do this by building a multi-stakeholder collaborative network of institutions, universities, FET colleges, NGOs, corporate, government and global development agencies, that will contribute to the massification of e-skills delivery at all levels such as Thought leaders, ICT practitioners, ICT users and the ICT illiterate in society.

As an entirely new organisation, the e-Skills Institute will be in a position to consider the current supply of and demand for skills, an appropriate portfolio of offerings, and innovative ways of teaching and learning from a variety of perspectives and without needing to defend entrenched opinions.

At the same time they will collaborate with stakeholders who have in the past been in competition with each other. And as the DoC points out, this does not mean that the very significant challenges that they will face as a new organization are not being recognised.

The most immediate of these is obtaining exceptionally capable staff and building credibility as well as a brand says the DoC.

Research essential to making it all work well

AN important part of the e-Skilling process is research and to this end a National Research Network for e-skills (ResNeS) has been created as a platform for multi-stakeholder collaborations on research to support the national e-Skills drive aimed at e-Skilling South Africa for equitable prosperity and global competitiveness.

ResNeS seeks to create a network of researchers across the higher education sector, the private sector, government, civil society and other role players to provide the research based essential intelligence required for e-Skilling South Africa.

The first event being organised by ResNeS is the Colloquium on e-skills on the November 3 – 4 this year at the Premier Hotel Regent in East London.

The theme of ResNeS 2011 is "e-Skilling for Equitable Prosperity and Global Competitiveness" and it will provide an opportunity for dynamic discussion and debate on research into knowledge production in the 21st century.

Importantly, it brings together leading researchers, educators, developers, practitioners, and policy makers who share their research and innovations in Education, Business, Civil Society and Government.

The Doc through its e-Skills Institute is therefore inviting people to go through the current research focus areas and to register for focus areas to which they can contribute. They have also called for papers and the best way to find out the full conditions for submissions is to access the website, *www.resnes.co.za*

These submissions could be in the form of a completed research paper, research in progress, descriptive case studies, extended abstracts, or proposals for panel discussions or tutorials.

However, research papers must be original, unpublished elsewhere and should be no longer than 6 000 words. An abstract of no more than 120 words should be included along with the body of the full paper.

Research in progress submissions must be at least 2 500 words in length, be substantially near completion, and also include a similar 120-word abstract.

Extended abstracts must be at least 1 000 words in length and identify the primary research question, a preliminary literature review and overview of the planned methodology.

Panel and tutorial proposals must include the names and affiliations of panelists who have agreed to participate and a one to two page summary of the topic – including a description of how the session will be structured.

Descriptive case studies may report specific pedagogical or curricular strategies being employed or under development, and should, again, be no longer than 6 000 words.

The Colloquium will basically follow specific tracks and, for example, Track 1 would encompass Employment Readiness – e-skills for Industry specific needs such as telecoms, financial and retail.

Track 2, would cover effective e-Governance and Service Delivery; e-skills for Service Delivery (Government – National, Provincial and Local); e-skills for Participation (Governance); e-skills for Democracy and e-skills for effective Parliamentary Processes (National, Provincial and Local)

Track 3 on the other hand would focus on Business Development such as E- Skills for Software Development (mobile application); e-skills for Developing New Industries for Information Society/Knowledge Economies and e-skills for Creative Industries

Track 4 would encompass e-skills Monitoring and Evaluation; Development of e-Readiness indicators and Measurement for SA e-skilling.

The fifth track would deal with Socio Economic Development such as e-skills for Teaching and Learning; e-skills for Health, SMMEs; creative industries; skills for women, the youth and the disabled as well as rural development, urban renewal, crime prevention and the social Impact of e-skills within the construct of MTSF and MDGs.

For full details, visit the website but it is important to note that final submissions must be