Training scientists and engineers for Africa

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A new African initiative aims to boost the continent’s development by building its technology base.

Scientific and technological advances have propelled productivity growth in many countries in recent years, but generally not in sub-Saharan Africa. The region’s failure to benefit from science and technology-based growth has deepened the cycle of poverty and widened the knowledge gap between Africa and the rest of the world.

To reverse that cycle and transform the region’s industrial and economic landscape, and to tap into the innovation and creativity of young Africans to create opportunities for new sources of growth, African scientists and professionals have formed the Nelson Mandela Institution for Knowledge Building and the Advancement of Science and Technology – a global effort to foster economic growth and diversification, industrial development, and employment creation through science, engineering, and their applications.

The new institution answers the call of the Commission for Africa for the development of “centres of excellence in science and technology, including African Institutes of Technology, on the continent.”

The institution’s first major initiative is the African Institute of Science and Technology (AIST), designed to train first a critical mass and then ensure a continuing supply of outstanding scientists and engineers to accelerate the development of the region. At full capacity, four AIST regional institutes will produce about 5,000 world-class scientists and engineers every year.

The initiative was introduced at the African Union Heads of State Summit in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in September 2004. Since then, expressions of interest and support have been received from firms and national governments in the region. Madagascar, for example, has pledged US$100,000 in support of the initiative, while Nigeria and Tanzania have offered tracts of land for the first two campuses. Nigeria also has agreed to host the AIST secretariat for its first two years of operation.

The independent institution has established an endowment to be funded by contributions from partners in the public and private sectors. The endowment approach is used by many academic institutions in the United States to mitigate risks and ensure long-term financial stability. Competitive processes, transparency, and accountability will be the hallmarks of all its operations.

Events to generate additional support for the venture will take place in Burkina Faso, Ghana, South Africa, Tanzania, and the United States (Washington, D.C.).

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