ICDL outlines its regional role in IT education for sustainable development and social change

David Carpenter, CEO, EDCL Foundation, stresses the need for mainstreaming IT education for creation of knowledge societies

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The need to harness the power of Information Technologies to sustain and develop a successful society, by emphasizing on the importance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy was highlighted at the recently concluded ICT conference for Sustainable Development, held in Abu Dhabi from 12-13, December 2004.

The conference, which was held under the patronage of His Highness Lieutenant General Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and organized by Abu Dhabi Water and Electricity Authority (ADWEA), saw the attendance of His Highness Sheikh Diab Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Chairman, ADWEA and debated the relevance of ICT to achieve sustainable development in economies around the region. It focused on how to use ICT as a development tool for improving the performance of market and the productivity of individuals and governments.

David Carpenter, CEO of European Computer Driving License Foundation (ECDL-F), spoke at the conference, driving home the need for ICT to be effectively used to bring about a positive social change and sustainable development by creation of knowledge societies through mainstreaming IT literacy at all levels of education in order to make an impact.

Addressing the conference Carpenter said, "The purpose of education is to improve the individual's place in the world and their relationship with it. IT facilitates dissemination of information, offers educational empowerment and supports active lifelong learning. ICT capacity building and infrastructure development needs to be accompanied by a vision of the IT competencies and skills that people need to acquire. Concerted action needs to be undertaken to raise the role of IT to be the facilitator of social change in a globalised society."

"The power of IT lie in enabling people and enterprises who have mastered its essential tools to capture economic opportunities by increasing process efficiency and promoting their participation in the rapidly expanding economic networks," said Carpenter. "ECDL Foundation was conceived with the express purpose of creating opportunities for employment and be a powerful enabler of development and a force in social change, by dedicating itself to providing access for all to the Information Society and raising the general level of computer skills in the society."

Commenting on the importance of IT literacy in the region, Jamil Ezzo, Director General, ICDL GCC Foundation said, "The GCC region is expanding rapidly on all fronts and there is an increased dependency on the Internet and the use of computers. In order to profit from this boom, we need to start from the grassroots. We have to ensure that computer literacy is given as much importance in schools as common education."

"In any educational system, the reform should start with the teacher, so that they in turn can impart the knowledge to the students and effectively reduce inequalities in education. In addition, special attention must be paid to providing IT skill enhancement programs to women, the unemployed and disadvantaged groups in order to improve their quality of life," he added.

Governments across the world are introducing computers in schools as a means to creating an IT literate work force to take advantage of opportunities that knowledge society brings about. In the GCC Countries, decision makers, policy analysts and social scientists have acknowledged the importance of IT for the development of the region and the governments have initiated key reforms to bring IT into the dominant discourse.

"As a consequence of these initiatives, teachers are required to make changes to their professional practice. Even today few initial teacher-training programs cover the use of computers in classrooms adequately," said Carpenter. "Besides this, there are few other challenges that have to be overcome before ICT's can make a real impact on the

GCC region."

In industrialised nations the economic base is shifting from industry to information and this shift may be even more pronounced in emerging nations. This shift demands new knowledge and skills in the workforce. IT has changed the nature of work and the types of skills required in most fields and professions. GCC Countries are now faced with the prospect of addressing the challenge posed to the educational systems to produce workers with the required skills and who are adaptable and receptive to lifelong learning.

"As the most widely accepted basic computer skills certification program in the world, ICDL is adequately positioned to further the cause of IT in the region," said Carpenter. "ICDL has been hugely popular in the GCC Countries, due to its design that ensures equal and fair access to all people, regardless of gender, ethnicity, physical ability, age or speciality area. As a result the ICDL certification programs are being adopted at a faster rate in all the countries of the GCC, making the region, the 6th fastest growing region internationally for ICDL."

During his visit to attend the conference in Abu Dhabi, Carpenter presented to His Highness Sheikh Diab Bin Zayed Al Nahyan a recognition award for his unwavering support to IT literacy in the region and ICDL programs in the UAE, Egypt and Yemen. His Highness Sheikh Mansour Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, UAE Minister for Presidential Affairs, His Highness Sheikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, UAE Minister for Education, Dr. Ahmed Saif Al Darmaki, Director of Planning & Development at Abu Dhabi Water & Electricity Authority (ADWEA) and Dr. Humoud Al Sadoun, Undersecretary of Kuwaiti Ministry of Education, were also honoured for their advocacy and relentless efforts in advancing the ICDL Certification in the GCC region.

"In this new era of knowledge and information, networking and collaborative work, like the one ICDL GCC is currently undertaking, have become vital to overcome the cycles of underdevelopment. Sharing information on contemporary issues and know-how in the field of ICT has become essential to improve societal needs. We thank the governments, educational authorities and key decision makers, who have shown their enthusiasm for the ICDL program," concluded Carpenter.