

ation scare



puter training is offered in technical colleges, resources in these institutions are either inadequate or misappropriated.

Few schools have sufficient ICT platforms for teachers and students. Estimates indicate that in schools that have computers, the student-computer ratio stands at 150:1. Besides, most of these computers are obsolete hardware that cannot run complex software.

Being aware of this problem, the Kenya National Examination Council dropped computer programming from the KCSE syllabus, but a new drive by the government to boost computer use in schools is expected to reignite interest in developing a syllabus for this course.

Credibility gap

Poor instruction in ICT education and lack of a local accreditation system to acknowledge varying computer skills or ranking of courses in terms of quality and certification has created a credibility gap among trained ICT professionals, with testing focusing mainly on the technical aspect of computers like programming and system analysis.

For instance, recent human resource trends show that Information Technology (IT) proficiency is a priority when it comes to recruitment of accountants. Familiarity with computer software, especially accounting packages, gives a candidate 25 per cent better chance of clinching the job.

"This means that people with no IT experience are disadvantaged," says Mr Wainaina Wanjiku, the managing director of Corporate Staffing Services, a Nairobi-based human resource consulting and recruiting company. The firm specialises in recruiting and training of accountants in readiness for the modern job market.

The government has taken notice and is acting tough. "We have been discussing this with a committee over a long period of time. As we intensify the digital villages training, we must have basic open standards and that is what we did.

These are similar standards for many countries around the world including the European Union. These are open standards that would lead this country to greater development," Dr Ndemo.

Colleges to be hard hit

But what will appear to be a major obstacle to the ICDL training is its cost compared to the many computer programmes taught in many colleges. It costs as little as Sh3,000 to train for about eight basic computer packages, but it will cost about Sh30,000 for ICDL, which has two parts.

Those who have computer training but don't have the certification can register to do the exam but, again, one must buy log books at a cost of about Sh6,000 and then register for examinations, which cost about Sh1000 per part.

Colleges will need to prove that they have the required facilities to be allowed to be examination centres for ICDL. This will also require them to employ qualified staff.

Through this, analysts predict that many computer training institutions will be forced out of business, but it will be a boom for those already offering the ICDL courses.

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REPORT

Fraud adds to sugar cane farmers' bitter experience

BY JOSEPH BONYO

A report by the Transparency International-Kenya released last week gives a grim plight of sugarcane farmers. It points out a number of malpractices such as manipulation of weighing scales, loss of harvested sugarcane, late harvesting and delay in payments.

"Lack of transparency and accountability in the sugar sub-sector could lead to the closure of more factories putting at stake about 40,000 jobs and the livelihoods of an estimated five million people who depend on sugarcane farming," the report says.

Manipulation of cane tonnage to shortchange farmers has been with the industry for years. Several measures have been suggested to curb this with little help from the government and the factories. This has largely been attributed with the failure to amend sections of the Sugar Act 2000 to allow for weighing at the farm.

Currently, the situation allows for minimal farmers' control during the weighing. But as if this is not enough, the farmers are also faced with rampant theft of harvested sugarcane being transported to the factories. According to the study, 70 per cent of the farmers believed that most cane disappeared at the weighing bridges.

"Twelve per cent of the farmers interviewed reported loss arising from cane poaching

by truck drivers contracted to ferry cane harvest. The poached cane was either sold to other farmers or private sugar milling firms," it says. Such cases were most prevalent when cane is transported at night as well as reported loss through swapping of cane. This occurs at the farm level where larger stacks are allocated to influential individuals or at the factories where cane measured is deliberately recorded on wrong accounts.

On average, cane should be harvested after 24 months with the exception of the initial harvest upon cane plant-

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ing. However, farmers in the region are faced with delayed harvests that result in paying higher interest rates on farm inputs. "The milling companies usually loan inputs to farmers which are recoverable on the harvest proceeds. The longer it takes to harvest the cane, the higher the interest charged," notes the TI report.

The document indicates that some of the malpractices related to delay in harvesting included 'helicopter harvesting' where farmers are picked selectively often favouring plantations owned by company officials or their associates.

However, the delay has also been attributed limited investment in harvesting technology by both the farmers and the factories. Only less than a quarter of the respondents had their cane harvested on time in the last season. It also took more than 30 months to harvest sugarcane for 17 per cent respondents while 59 per cent had their cane harvested between 24 and 30 months.

Farmers too have an issue with payment, which has led to accumulation of hundreds of millions of shillings in unpaid dues.

While each factory has its own procedure on payments, the problem cuts across the sugar belts. Privately owned mills are more prompt in issuing payment than government-run millers.

"Close to 70 per cent reported receipt of payment between three to eight months later. About six per cent reported payment after a period of more than nine months," says the report

TI in association with Sugar Campaign for Change Movement (SUCAM) carried out the integrity study in the western Kenya and Nyando basin. The study sampled 547 farmers and covered eight private and publicly owned companies.

"The study found that the disappearance of part of cane harvest during delivery is the most open form of impropriety in sugar production. Eighty-six per cent of the farmers interviewed reported that they have been victims of cane theft," says the report.

