

Slovakia

PCs for schools: from rhetoric to reality

Slovakia is the only acceding country where the Internet is accessed more often from an Internet café than from a place of education, a clear indicator of education's limited contribution to creating the information society. According to local and international experts, and surveys such as the 2003 eEurope+ progress report, Slovakia's preparation for the information society is inadequate.

Lack of funding is responsible for the poor ICT infrastructure in Slovak education. For many years the INFOVEK project, with its well considered four-pillar policy, suffered from insufficient support from the state budget. Despite the rhetoric in policy papers supporting education, the information society and a knowledge-based society - despite even the signing of the eEurope+ initiative and the subsequent public-private partnership initiative eSlovakia - there was no decisive action. Now, strident public criticism seems to be bringing about change.

The PCs for Schools project, which is the part of the eSlovakia initiative, was officially launched on 15 January 2004 at the rural basic school in Ivanka pri Dunaji, when the door was opened on the first ICT classroom connected to the Internet using ADSL technology. Nationwide implementation began on 13 April 2004 and, by the end of the year, more than 22 000 IBM computers will have been donated by Deutsche Telekom AG for new ICT classrooms in over 3 500 basic and secondary schools in Slovakia. All schools will have the necessary technology infrastructure and a service 'package' of five student PCs, one teacher PC, printer, scanner and tablet. All PCs will be provided with Microsoft Windows XP Professional SK and Microsoft Office 2003 SK. A free guarantee service will be in place for four years. In addition, all basic and secondary schools will be connected to the Internet by ISDN or ADSL technology by the end of 2004.

Alternative Internet providers and small hardware/software firms - traditionally anti-Telecom and/or anti-Gates - are critical. They question whether the Slovak authorities have always believed in the existence of free lunches or think they were invented only in Slovakia in 2004. For the hungry education sector this is irrelevant and the schools see the project in a very positive light. Independent analysts, however, have three pointed questions:

- Why did Slovakia not invite the private sector into the INFOVEK project sooner to speed up the introduction of information technology?
- Would it not have been better to follow a solid incremental policy, providing gradual improvement of ICT in schools, instead of launching a rescue operation at the last minute?
- Are complementary activities being prepared to make as much additional use of the infrastructure as possible? There is always a danger that the most visible effect of such a project is an increasing number of children playing games on PCs, instead of in playgrounds, and a flurry of pictures in the local press and school yearbooks showing smiling people at schools with new computers. Those behind the INFOVEK and PCs for Schools projects are fully aware of this danger and are determined that this initiative will learn from the mistakes of others.

For information on eSlovakia initiative inclusive PCs for Schools project see
<http://www.slovaktelecom.sk/En/Default.aspx?CatID=31>

Source: Slovak National Observatory of VET