

User-friendly e-voting an option for South Africa

Mercury Reporter

SOUTH Africa could soon join countries like India, Brazil and the Phillipines in replacing traditional paper ballot-based voting with electronic voting (e-voting).

The director of e-Skills CoLab at the Durban University of Technology, Colin Thakur, recently completed an 18-month study on e-voting to determine the impact it could have here.

He announced his findings at a two-day seminar on the subject, which the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) held in Cape Town last week.

“The findings of the study were that e-voting is a useful technology to enable democracy,” said Thakur.

Controlled e-voting took place in a booth, as opposed to uncontrolled e-voting which took place using the internet, smart phones and fax machines. It incorporated a touch-screen interface, a keyboard, “jelly buttons” and paper ballots that were optically scanned.

Large fonts, bright colours and audio output made this technology user-friendly and elections were considered “free and fair” in the 12 coun-

tries that had already used it. It also proved an eco-friendly alternative to traditional voting.

“India used 12 000 metric tons of paper for its 1998 elections, which is a whole forest,” said Thakur.

But many countries – such as the Netherlands, Ireland and Australia – introduced and then stopped e-voting. The reasons cited included security concerns, voter dissent and the high costs involved. E-voting would also remove the auditability of an election by taking away the paper ballot and making a recount impossible.

“This would have a huge impact on transparency,” said Thakur.

The e-voting machines were also susceptible to “hacks” and initial start-up costs would be high. “We would need over R1 billion to initiate e-voting,” he said.

Thakur said e-voting would make elections quicker and ensure a “direct democracy” in which the government could defer to the electorate on issues such as coal and nuclear plants, dams and rivers and toll roads.

The IEC has not yet made a decision on whether to adopt e-voting.