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Computer studies in Congo

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Light in the Harvard of darkness

Jul 3rd 2003 | KINSHASA
From The Economist print edition

Against the odds, Congolese students are learning about IT

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DOZENS of students stand at a bend in the road, waiting to hijack a truck. They have picked a good spot for it. An enormous pothole cuts the road in two, forcing vehicles to slow almost to a stop. The students then pile on and force the driver to take them, for free, to their university, some 15km (nine miles) away on the outskirts of Kinshasa, Congo's squalid capital. Every week or so a driver dares say no, and gets a beating or his truck smashed up.

Other, better behaved (and female) students prefer to stay on campus, sleeping in classrooms to save money, and to be sure of getting a desk when lectures start in the morning. There are some 15,000 students at the University of Kinshasa, and though they might be from the nation's better-off families, few can afford the daily minibus fare of 300 Congolese Francs (about \$0.75).

Student life in Kinshasa is not for the faint-hearted. Few institutions in Congo have escaped the country's steady slide into ruin, and the university, built by its Belgian founders to be central Africa's biggest and best, is no exception. The science faculty's library, for example, now houses fewer than 300 books. The volunteers who work there complain that all are out of date and half are in languages no one speaks. Degree courses are supposed to last five years, but strikes by unpaid teaching staff and riots by angry students mean the academic year often runs late, sometimes a whole year late.

For most students, however, the effort is worth it. If you want a job and daddy is not a minister, you need skills. In one small classroom, a handful of students are bent over computer screens, eagerly learning to build and operate local computer networks and link them to the internet. The course is sponsored by the United Nations and Cisco, an American software firm. Technology makes up, at least partly, for the shortage of books and teachers. Students at the "Cisco Academy" do not use books at all. Instead, all



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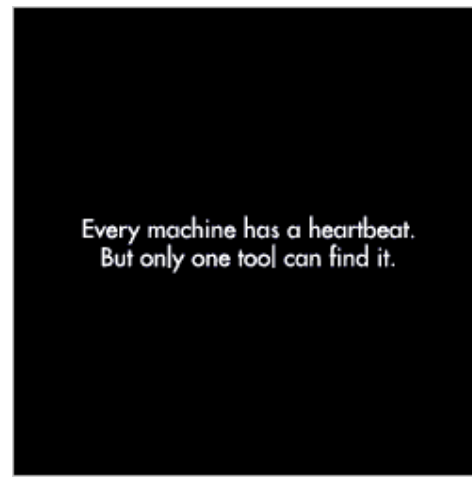
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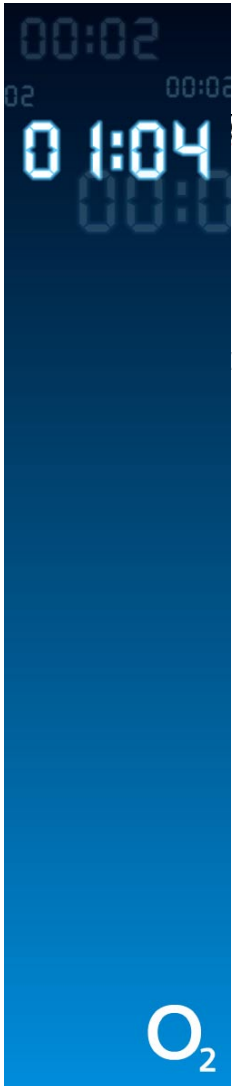
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Cisco gives [details of its educational initiatives](#) around the world. See also the [UNDP's Congo information](#) (in French).

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learning is done online. Tests are sent off to markers a continent away at the touch of a button—when the electricity is working.

When the students graduate, they find their skills in demand. Although (or perhaps because) the country's postal and fixed-line telephone services have long since atrophied, mobile telephones and email are booming, and the firms that supply them need IT-savvy recruits. Kinshasa University's e-learners are excited about their prospects, but realistic. Etienne Mukwanga says she is proud to be learning something useful, despite all the hardships. Her ambition? The same as all the other students: "To become someone who can support her father, mother, brothers and sisters."

The Phaeton £42,950 to £68,250



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