

Africa reclaims its position at the forefront of the world's maths stage

Education Minister Angie Motshekga has announced that the 55th International Mathematical Olympiad (IMO) - the World Cup of mathematics - will be hosted in Africa for the first time.



In partnership with the South African National Roads Agency SOC Ltd (SANRAL) and the South African Maths Foundation, the olympiad will take place in Cape Town from 3 to 13 July.

Part of a much wider approach to community development and skills transfers

SANRAL is sponsoring R1m towards this prestigious competition as part of its commitment to education - which is the country's apex priority.

"Undisputedly, Africa is home to the world's earliest known use of measuring and calculation, confirming the continent as the birthplace of both basic and advanced mathematics," said SANRAL CEO Nazir Alli.

"It is clear mathematics was born in Africa and we want to rejuvenate the continent's pride in giving the world this essential tool used in many fields, including natural science, engineering, medicine, finance and the social sciences."

Alli said SANRAL's contribution to maths enhancement through its sponsorship towards the 2014 IMO was important as it was part of a much wider approach to community development and skills transfers.

SA's development as a knowledge economy depends partly on improving the teaching of mathematics and numeracy

He said mathematics was a key requirement not only for entry into higher education, but also for most modern, knowledge-intensive work. South Africa's development as a knowledge economy depends partly on improving the teaching of mathematics and numeracy.

SANRAL is committed to helping more students enter into science-related studies and careers and has sponsored several programmes at both high school and tertiary levels.

"Education is one of the key priorities of the South African government and SANRAL has for many years been offering bursaries to young high school learners as a way of ploughing back into the community.

"It was, therefore, an easy choice to partner with the South African Mathematics Foundation because our economy has such a big need for students with a high ability in mathematics," said Alli.

He added that given the critical role SANRAL plays in civil engineering - which requires skills in mathematics - the agency uses every possible opportunity to equip learners with the necessary skills to enter the science, technology and engineering fields.

"By hosting a successful IMO and ensuring South African students excel in the competition, the country will be sending out the message to the rest of the continent that there is hope that Africa can measure up to international standards in the mathematical world by producing the next generation of mathematicians," said Alli.

What it means to take part in the IMO

The IMO is the world championship mathematics competition for youths younger than 20 years, hosted by a different country each year. The first IMO was held in 1959 in Romania, with seven countries participating. It has gradually expanded to over 100 countries from five continents.

Professor Johann Engelbrecht, Executive Director of the South African Mathematics Foundation said, "IMO contestants invariably go on to university and graduate with studies in mathematics, usually in their home countries.

"After that, they will consider to travel to do postdoctoral work at the best university specialising in a specific area. The IMO 'Class of 2014' may well put South Africa on their list of options for postdoctoral work, and even for future careers."

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