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Panel on Education

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 12 April 2010

Development of e-Learning and provision of Internet access charges

Purpose

This paper summarizes the concerns of the Panel on Education (the Panel) on the development of e-Learning and the provision of Internet access charges.

Background

2. Since 1998, the Administration had launched three information technology (IT) in education strategies and had invested about \$8 billion with the aim of shifting the paradigm in school education from a textbook-based and teacher-centred mode to a more interactive learner-centred mode. The objective of promoting IT in education is to improve the effectiveness of learning through electronic technology.

The Five-year Strategy

3. In 1998, the Administration released the first IT in Education Strategy document entitled "Information Technology for Learning in a New Era: Five-year Strategy - 1998/99 to 2002/03". The first IT in Education Strategy focused on equipping schools with necessary IT facilities, connecting them to the Internet and providing digital resources for learning and teaching.

The Second Strategy

4. In July 2004, the Administration published the second IT in Education Strategy document entitled "Empowering Learning and Teaching with Information Technology". The objectives were to enhance students' information literacy, build up the capacity of teachers and disseminate best practices in using IT in the learning and teaching process among teachers, nurture e-leadership among school leaders, engage the community in creating an environment conducive to the use of

IT in education, and narrow the digital divide.

The Third Strategy

5. To meet the changing needs of schools, teachers and students as their capacity in using IT in learning and teaching developed, the third IT in Education Strategy entitled "Right Technology at the Right Time for the Right Task" was launched in 2008. This strategy aimed to provide a depository of curriculum-based teaching modules with appropriate digital resources, sharpen teachers' IT pedagogical skills, assist schools to draw up and implement school-based IT in education development plans, enable schools to maintain effective IT facilities, strengthen technical support to schools and teachers, as well as raise parents' information literacy and assist them in guiding children to use IT at home.

Development of e-Learning

6. Following the implementation of the three IT in Education Strategies, the Administration set up in October 2008 the Working Group on Textbooks and e-Learning Resources Development (the Working Group) to study the use and development of textbooks and e-Learning resources. The Working Group submitted its report to the Secretary for Education in October 2009. The major recommendations put forward by the Working Group concerning the development of e-Learning are as follows -

- (a) a three-year pilot scheme on "Promoting e-Learning" will be launched in 20 to 30 local schools in the 2010-2011 school year;
- (b) additional resources will be provided to strengthen and expedite the development of the existing "Depository of Curriculum-based Learning and Teaching Resources" (the Depository) from the 2009-2010 school year onwards;
- (c) a one-off grant will be provided in the 2009-2010 school year to all local schools for purchasing e-Learning resources for students; and
- (d) an e-commerce platform for e-Learning resources and an online community for teachers at the Hong Kong Education City (HKEdCity) website will be set up.

Deliberations of the Panel

7. The Panel had discussed the development of e-Learning and the provision of Internet access charges in the context of school textbook prices at a number of meetings. The Panel had also received views from deputations. The major issues of concern raised by members concerning e-Learning and Internet access charges are summarized in the following paragraphs.

One-off grant to schools for purchasing e-Learning resources

8. Members noted that the Administration would set aside \$50 million for providing a one-off grant to government, aided, caput, and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools (including special schools) in the 2010-2011 school year for purchasing e-Learning resources and the grant could be spent over three years. They sought information on the basis for arriving at the amount, and were concerned whether the provision was adequate.

9. The Administration explained that the original plan was to provide the \$50 million grant to schools in one-year. As only limited suitable e-Learning resources were available on the market, schools requested an extension of the one-year period to three years. The Administration would monitor the trend of using e-Learning resources. Should schools have financial difficulties in purchasing the necessary teaching materials, the Administration would provide more funding for schools.

Availability of e-Learning resources

10. To reduce the rising textbook prices, members considered it necessary for the Administration to explore the feasibility of electronic textbooks. Since teachers could not afford the time to produce e-resources, members called on the Administration to collaborate with the HKEdCity to provide resources for schools to develop school-based e-resources. Many deputations urged the Administration to provide assistance to teachers to develop electronic learning materials and to address related issues such as revision of software, increased workload of teachers, and changed mode of teaching.

11. The Administration pointed out that it had undertaken under the Third Strategy to develop the Depository for Primary to Secondary 3 levels in Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and General Studies (Science for secondary). The original intention was to complete the Depository for the primary level by the end of the 2010-2011 school year, and the secondary level by the end of the 2012-2013 school year. In line with the Working Group's recommendations, the Administration proposed that the completion of the Depository for the primary level should be advanced to the end of the 2009-2010 school year, and the Depository should be further strengthened, updated, and enhanced thereafter for two years. The Depository for the primary level collected free resources, both online and printed, provided by local and overseas government organizations, tertiary institutions, schools and non-profit-making organizations. The resources were selected and organized into thematic units based on the local curriculum framework, with teaching suggestions as well as user guides. A sum of \$20 million had been earmarked under the Third Strategy for the staff costs to develop the Depository for the primary to junior secondary levels. In order to expedite and strengthen the development, an additional \$2.5 million would be required for the primary level and about \$9.5 million for the secondary level, totaling \$12 million from the 2010-2011 to 2013-2014 financial years.

Copyright of e-Learning resources

12. Some stakeholders had expressed concern to the Working Group about copyright of online resources. It was pointed out that as the source of a large amount of online resources was unknown, some teachers were unable to obtain permission to use the materials. Publishers, on the other hand, were concerned about the illegal use of e-resources as these resources could be disseminated more readily than printed materials. The Working Group suggested that studies on the issue be carried out in order to formulate relevant strategies and support measures.

13. Members had received views from textbook publishers about copyright owners demanding high copyright fees which had posed a financial burden on them. Textbook publishers pointed out that while the copyright fees for printed textbooks could be set in accordance with the number of copies sold, there was no established mechanism for determining the copyright fees for online resources and the patronage of online resources was difficult to ascertain. Members sought information from the Administration on the guidelines for setting the relevant fees. Members considered that the issue of copyright of online resources warranted in-depth study. They noted that the Administration had not sought additional funding for carrying out studies on the subject as suggested by the Working Group.

14. The Administration explained that there were different modes for charging copyright fees for using online resources, such as by monthly payments or lump sum payments. There was no copyright fee for the use of certain resources, such as the "Creative Commons Hong Kong", for the benefit of the education sector. The Administration was aware of the importance of respecting the right of copyright owners, and had been educating teachers and students on legal use of copyright materials. The Administration also advised that it could absorb within its existing resources the cost for carrying out the studies on copyright of online resources.

15. Members requested the Administration to thoroughly discuss the matter with publishers and provide written information on the outcome of its discussion to the Panel. Members also requested the Consumer Council to follow up the matter.

e-Learning opportunities for needy students

16. Members expressed support for the "Computer Recycling Programme" (the Programme) to encourage donation of old computers to help needy students under the Second Strategy. However, they were concerned about the limited scope of the project, provision of only one-year free Internet access service and incompatibility of the recycled computers with the updated software necessary for completing school assignments. Members pointed out that students without updated computers and access to the Internet at home were in a disadvantageous position in learning. They urged the Administration to expand the scope of the project to cover all needy students.

17. The Administration explained that under the Programme, the donated computers would be refurbished, bundled with necessary software and Internet access service for use by students. Schools could give such computers to needy students directly, loan the computers to them or install the computers in schools for shared use. A number of non-profit making organizations were offering the service of on-loan laptops to needy students. Furthermore, the Education Bureau (EDB) would provide basic IT skills training to the parents concerned prior to the allocation of these computers, to enable proper parental guidance on the use of computers in these underprivileged families. The Administration advised that the funds for the project had been increased from \$25 million to \$62 million and some 21 000 families had applied successfully for the Programme.

18. Members noted concerns raised by a deputation that it took several months for the receipt and installation of the recycled computers and only one Internet service company could be used. The Internet coverage provided by that company was unstable and could not cover all residential buildings, in particular public housing estates, village houses and old buildings where many needy students lived.

19. Members called on the Administration to take proactive actions to address the deputation's concerns and encourage schools, in particular those located in districts with a large number of low-income families, to extend the opening hours of their computer rooms beyond normal school hours to facilitate use by needy students.

20. The Administration explained that recurrent grants had been provided to all primary and secondary schools to facilitate them to make available computer rooms and facilities for the use of needy students after school. For a 29-class school, it received an annual grant of \$340,000 with part of it to be used for upgrading computer hardware and software. The Office of the Government Chief Information Officer was spearheading the District Cyber Centres (DCCs) pilot scheme in partnership with the private sector, professional associations and community organizations. DCCs provided computing facilities, Internet connectivity and technical support as well as laptops on loan for students from low-income families.

Internet access charges

21. Members shared the concern of many deputations that since students had to access the Internet for research and completing assignments, the cost of computers and Internet access charges had become a financial burden on many needy families. Extensive use of e-learning materials would create a digital divide, marginalizing the students of these families. Although free Internet facilities were made available to students at various locations across the territory such as at Integrated Children and Youth Services Centres and public libraries, the demand for use of computers in public libraries was heavy and students had to wait for a long time to use the computers for a limited period. To ensure that students of low-income families would have equal opportunities as other students in e-Learning, members considered it important to provide Internet access charges for needy students.

Given that Internet access charge was a recurrent expenditure, members called on the Administration to consider including such expenditure in the School Textbook Assistance Scheme as a recurrent grant.

Latest development

22. In the 2009-2010 Policy Address, the Chief Executive announced that to mitigate the impact of the digital divide on the quality of learning, the Financial Secretary would coordinate the efforts of relevant bureaux to examine, through tripartite collaboration between the community, the business sector and the Government, options to provide convenient and suitable Internet learning opportunities for students in need. After studying the issue, the Financial Secretary proposed in the 2010-2011 Budget to adopt a two-pronged approach to help primary and secondary students from low-income families with Internet learning by granting a subsidy for Internet access charges and encouraging the market to provide them with economical Internet services.

23. The Financial Secretary proposed to grant a subsidy of \$1,300 for Internet access charges in the 2010 school year to each family receiving Comprehensive Social Security Assistance with children studying in primary or secondary schools. For each family with children studying primary or secondary schools and eligible for student financial assistance, they would be granted a full subsidy of \$1,300 or half subsidy of \$650 depending on the outcome of their means test.

24. To offer an affordable option to students receiving the subsidies, the Government is also making preparations for a non-profit making organization to collaborate with private service providers and community organizations to provide economical Internet services and computer hardware to low-income families in need. The organization will also provide complementary services such as parent education and technical support. Expressions of interest from interested non-profit making organizations will be invited. When the organization has begun to provide economical Internet services that meet learning needs, the subsidies for Internet access charges for subsequent school years will be suitably adjusted. The Administration has earmarked a total of \$500 million as the start-up capital for these two measures.

Relevant papers

25. A list of the relevant papers on the Legislative Council website is in the **Appendix**.

**Relevant papers on
development of e-Learning and provision of Internet access charges**

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Finance Committee	18.4.1997	Minutes FCR(97-98)2
Panel on Education	20.6.1997 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	17.10.1997 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Finance Committee	5.12.1997	Minutes FCR(97-98)73
Panel on Education	28.7.1998 (Item II)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	29.7.1998	Official Record of Proceedings (Question 15)
Legislative Council	29.7.1998	Official Record of Proceedings (Question 17)
Panel on Education	26.10.1998 (Item III)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	16.11.1998 (Item III)	Minutes Agenda
Finance Committee	29.1.1999	Minutes FCR(98-99)71
Panel on Education	15.9.1999 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	8.6.2000 (Item I)	Minutes Agenda
Finance Committee	23.6.2000	Minutes FCR(2000-01)37
Panel on Education	18.6.2001 (Item VI)	Minutes Agenda

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Legislative Council	17.10.2001	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 7 - 12 (Question)
Panel on Education	28.2.2002 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	2.7.2003	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 105 - 107 (Question)
Legislative Council	18.2.2004	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 38 - 42 (Question)
Panel on Education	19.4.2004 (Item IV)	Minutes Agenda
Panel on Education	21.6.2004 (Item VII)	Minutes Agenda
Finance Committee	2.7.2004	Minutes FCR(2004-05)27
Panel on Education	9.5.2005 (Item V)	Minutes Agenda
Finance Committee	10.6.2005	Minutes FCR(2005-06)14
Legislative Council	25.10.2006	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 40 - 42 (Question)
Legislative Council	18.4.2007	Official Record of Proceedings Pages 20 - 23 (Question)
Panel on Education	11.6.2007 (Item VI)	Minutes Agenda
Legislative Council	17.12.2008	[Question 8] Access to computers and internet by students from recipient families under CSSA Scheme (Hansard English – pages 69-71)
Panel on Education	11.5.2009 (Item V)	Minutes Agenda

Meeting	Date of meeting	Paper
Legislative Council	13.5.2009	[Question 11] High prices of school textbooks (Hansard English - pages 77-80)
Legislative Council	3.6.2009	[Question 18] Prices of school textbooks (Hansard English – pages 101-105)
Panel on Education	14.12.2009 (Item VI)	Minutes Agenda
Executive Summary of Main Report of the Working Group on Textbook and e-Learning Resources Development		CB(2)518/09-10(01)
Panel on Education	8.2.2010 (Item V)	Minutes Agenda

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