

For discussion  
on 17 December 2013

## **Legislative Council Subcommittee on Poverty**

### **Helping Students of Limited Means take advantage of the Learning Opportunities through the Internet**

#### **Purpose**

This paper briefs Members on the Administration's key initiatives in helping students of limited means take advantage of the learning opportunities through the Internet.

#### **Background**

2. With the advance in information & communications technology (ICT), web-based learning has become an integral part of education. Alongside the wide use of the Internet for teaching and learning activities at schools, students increasingly resort to the Internet to search for information, use learning resources, complete their homework, and communicate with their peers and teachers. Access to the Internet at home is thus becoming indispensable for all students.

3. To help students of limited means take advantage of the learning opportunities through the Internet on a par with better-off peers, the Government has adopted a two-pronged approach to assist students from low-income families to undertake web-based learning at home. Beneficiary families are those with children who are full-time students receiving education at primary and secondary levels and eligible for financial assistance under the Student Financial Assistance Agency (SFAA) or the flat-rate grant for school-related expenses under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) scheme. The two initiatives are —

- (a) providing a non-accountable annual cash Internet Subsidy Scheme to eligible families starting from the 2010/11 school year onwards; and
- (b) implementing the “i Learn at home” Internet Learning Support

Programme<sup>1</sup> (the Programme) to provide comprehensive support to the target beneficiaries to help them make effective use of the subsidy and the Internet for enhancing their quality of learning.

## **Internet Subsidy Scheme**

4. Under the “Internet Subsidy Scheme”, beneficiary families, irrespective of their number of children, will receive financial support to provide Internet access to their children for the purpose of learning, thus reducing the effect of the digital divide. In the 2013/14 school year, the full-grant annual subsidy rate is \$1,300 and the half-grant rate is \$650 for eligible families under SFAA. Eligible CSSA families will receive \$1,300. In the 2012/13 school year, this scheme released nearly \$250 million Internet subsidy to over 228 000 families.

## **Internet Learning Support Programme (the Programme)**

### *Implementation Arrangements*

5. The Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) launched the Programme in July 2011. At present, two non-profit organisations, namely the Boys’ & Girls’ Clubs Association of Hong Kong (BGCA) and WebOrganic, are commissioned to implement the Programme in the eastern and western parts of Hong Kong respectively. These two organisations, or the Implementers, are required to provide the same set of baseline services to target beneficiaries in their service regions as follows —

- (a) assisting eligible families to acquire affordable computers suitable for learning purpose with flexible payment options;
- (b) assisting eligible families to acquire Internet service at concessionary pricing;
- (c) free student training on proper and safe use of the Internet for learning purpose;
- (d) free training to help parents provide guidance and support their children with web-based learning;
- (e) free technical and user support; and
- (f) free counselling for Internet-related issues such as Internet addiction, cyber-bullying, etc.

### *Progress of Implementation*

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<sup>1</sup> At its meeting on 28 May 2010, the Legislative Council Finance Committee approved a funding commitment of \$220 million for the implementation of the Programme.

6. Since the Programme was launched in July 2011, OGCIO and the two Implementers worked hard to promote the Programme, improve the Programme offers and drive participation from eligible families. Programme materials are distributed to **all** eligible families through the SFAA and the Social Welfare Department SWD. A series of promotion activities, including briefings to schools and district councils, reaching-out to students from ethnic minorities groups, etc were embarked on to introduce the Programme to different stakeholders including eligible families, school heads, school social workers, teachers, family service centres, and potential support groups. The Implementers also set up additional service centres in different districts to provide more convenient access to the Programme services, and launched seasonal discounts as well as value-added products and services to entice participation.

7. By the end of the 2012/13 school year, of the 282 000 eligible families, 74 822 families (26.5%) have enrolled in the Programme and 21 199 families (28.3% of those enrolled and 7.5% of eligible families) have received at least one type of services from the Implementers in the past two school years. At the same time, we observed that in the past three years, the Internet adoption rate of students from low-income families has increased significantly from 87% in 2010<sup>2</sup> to 96% in 2012. This 96% is close to the mainstream 97% adoption rate<sup>3</sup>.

#### *Mid-Term Review*

8. Having regard to the experience in the past two years, the latest changes in market environment as well as the feedback collected from service recipients through focus group discussions and telephone surveys, OGCIO completed a mid-term review in June 2013 with a view to enhancing the effectiveness of implementation arrangements in the remaining term of the Programme. While OGCIO concluded that the implementation model and the six baseline services set out in paragraph 5 should remain unchanged, some adjustments were introduced to better meet the learning needs of service recipients as well as to enhance the cost-effectiveness of the Programme —

- (a) OGCIO to source discounted computer and Internet service offers with increased product variety, and make available the offers to all eligible families in both the eastern and western parts of Hong Kong;

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<sup>2</sup> Source : a survey conducted by Policy 21 Ltd in early 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Source : Thematic Household Survey conducted by the Census and Statistics Department in 2012.

- (b) OGCIO to undertake territory-wide publicity and promotion through a single brand name of “i Learn at home” to promote the awareness among all stakeholders; and
- (c) the Implementers to strengthen the provision of free technical support services, as such services could be pricey in the market and sometimes difficult to source.

### *Current Situation*

9. The above adjustments have been implemented in the 2013/14 school year. OGCIO has set up a common repertoire of computer and Internet service offers for all service recipients, comprising broadband Internet services of different bandwidth and over 20 models of computer equipment ranging from desktop, notebook, tablet to printer to meet unique learning needs of different students. The Implementers continue to assist service recipients to select and purchase suitable products from the repertoire, and provide those in need with flexible payment arrangements where necessary. With more diversified and economical choices, the offers are well received by the target families. Some 1 200 broadband services packages and 900 computer equipment have been sold to eligible families in the first three months of the 2013/14 school year, representing an increase of monthly sales by 112% and 35% for broadband services and computer equipment respectively.

10. Besides, the Implementers have strengthened technical and user support with additional technical staff stationed at individual service centres. Home visits will also be arranged where necessary to render onsite support. On the other hand, OGCIO actively promotes the Programme services to all stakeholders. Publicity through different media are also arranged to raise general awareness to the Programme in the community.

### *Way Forward*

11. OGCIO will continue with the Programme implementation to help students of limited means to take advantage of suitable Internet learning opportunities. Noting that some target beneficiaries may not have immediate needs for various support services in the Programme, OGCIO will continue with vigorous promotion so that families in need (or people around them such as their teachers, social workers and friends) would readily know how to access the Programme services should the need arises.

## **Advice Sought**

12. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

**Office of the Government Chief Information Officer  
Education Bureau  
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