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Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting

Meeting on 13 April 2015

Updated background brief on digital inclusion

Purpose

      This paper summarizes previous discussions by members of the Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting ("the ITB Panel") on issues relating to digital inclusion, with particular focus on the Internet Learning Support Programme ("ILSP").

Background

2.   The Administration has put in place a comprehensive digital inclusion programme to help underprivileged groups, elderly, persons with disabilities ("PwDs") and students from low-income families [1] leverage technology, enhance their quality of living and connect with the society. The current digital inclusion initiatives include:

    (a)   the ILSP for students of limited means;

    (b)   Web Accessibility Campaign for persons with disabilities;

    (c)   Digital Inclusion Mobile Applications for underprivileged groups;

    (d)   IT Star Award Scheme for elderly; and

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[1] "Low-income families" refer to those families with children who are full-time students receiving education at primary and secondary levels and who are eligible for the flat-rate grant for School-related Expenses under the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance scheme or financial assistance under the Student Financial Assistance Agency.

(e)　Outreaching Service for institutionalized and "hidden" elderly.

Internet Learning Support Programme

3.　　In his 2010-2011 Budget, the Financial Secretary announced a two-pronged strategy to assist students from low-income families to undertake web-based learning at home through provision of an Internet access subsidy and the ILSP which aims at helping eligible families acquire affordable computers and Internet access service and providing them with technical and social support.　Following consultation with the Panel on Education, the Administration obtained the approval of the Finance Committee[2] ("FC") for a funding of $500 million for these two initiatives at its meeting on 28 May 2010.

4.　　To assist students from low-income families to undertake web-based learning at home, and with funding approval from FC, the Government has embarked on the "i Learn at Home" (also known as the ILSP) since July 2011. The Government had commissioned eInclusion, which was jointly formed by the Boys' & Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong ("BGCA") and the Internet Professional Association ("iProA"), and WebOrganic, formed by the Hong Kong Council of Social Services, as implementers of the ILSP ("the Implementers") in the eastern and western parts of Hong Kong respectively. The Government had terminated the Funding and Operation Agreement with eInclusion with effect from 19 May 2013 and appointed BGCA to take over the implementation of the ILSP in the eastern part of Hong Kong.　The baseline services undertaken by the Implementers under the ILSP are as follows:

(a)　affordable computers suitable for learning purpose with flexible payment options;

(b)　Internet service at concessionary pricing;

(c)　free training to students on proper and safe use of the Internet for learning purpose;

(d)　free training to help parents provide guidance and support to their children on web-based learning;

(e)　free technical and user support; and

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[2]　At the meeting on 28 May 2010, FC approved a funding commitment of $220 million for implementation of the ILSP.

    (f)   counselling services for Internet-related issues such as Internet addiction, cyber-bullying, etc.

Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting

5.   The ITB Panel received regular updates from the Administration on the initiatives undertaken by the Government, non-governmental organizations and the private sector to bridge digital divide and leverage the capabilities of information and communications technology[3] ("ICT") to enhance the quality of life of underprivileged groups. Members of the ITB Panel in general considered that more resources should be allocated to drive up ICT adoption and help integrate the needy groups, such as the low-income families with children, PwDs, and the elderly in the digital society. Members also called on the Administration to draw up quantifiable performance indicators and benchmark to measure the progress and effectiveness of the digital inclusion initiatives.

Implementation and review of the Internet Learning Support Programme

6.   At the ITB Panel meeting on 12 May 2014, members noted that within the period from April 2014 to March 2015, each of the Implementers would be required to achieve 51 000 cumulative eligible enrolments since launch, 9 000 eligible families served, 3 000 families first served in the period and 25 000 services provided to eligible families. Some members suggested that a key performance indicator should be devised for average cost-per-service provided by the Implementers.

7.   The ITB Panel noted that as at 31 March 2014, the cumulative potential doubtful debts and write-offs arising from delinquent instalment payments from hire purchase of computer equipment and broadband services under the ILSP amounted to $683,000 and $211,000 respectively. Noting that the potential doubtful debts relating to WebOrganic amounted to $317,000 involving 259 cases and the potential doubtful debts relating to BGCA was $1,000 involving four cases, some members opined that the Administration should strengthen programme monitoring and take remedial measures to rectify the problem.

8.   The Administration assured members that both WebOrganic and BGCA had put in place appropriate measures and processes to handle such cases and minimize similar occurrences. The Programme Steering Committee, led by the Government Chief Information Officer and comprising representatives

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[3] Information and communications technology refers to all technologies and applications that involve information processing and/or exchange over communication networks, including the Internet.

from the Education Bureau and the Social Welfare Department, maintained oversight of the delivery and performance of the Implementers, including the delinquent cases. At some members' request, the Administration provided written response on details of the bad-debt situation of the ILSP, which was circulated to members vide LC Paper No. CB(4)179/14-15(01) on 20 November 2014.

9.   According to the Administration, to minimize bad debts as far as possible, the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer ("OGCIO") had asked the Implementers to put in place a systematic mechanism to assess and recover delinquent loans. A reminder would be issued to the family in question after a payment was overdue for over one month. If the payment remained unsettled, at least five reminders would be issued in the three months that follow. Should the non-payment situation continue, a formal letter requesting immediate settlement would be sent. If the situation warranted, a social worker would visit the family to ascertain the reasons of non-payment and identify any need for assistance.

10.   The Administration advised that with the above procedures, $212,000 out of the $281,000 doubtful debts (as at 31 March 2014) had been recovered. An amount of $8,000 in bad debts which had previously been written off was also recovered. In some cases, it transpired that the service recipients failing to honour payments were beset with financial difficulties or family problems such as unemployment, illness, etc. The above procedures not only helped recover delinquent loans but also enabled the Implementers to understand the problems service recipients were grappling with and provide timely support to them. OGCIO would conduct another review of the ILSP in 2015-2016 which would cover the issue of doubtful debts of the ILSP.

Digital inclusion mobile applications for underprivileged groups

11.   At the ITB Panel meeting on 12 May 2014, some members noted that funding support would be provided to successful applicants for the development of mobile applications ("apps") for underprivileged groups and enquired whether there would be on-going monitoring of the performance of the developers in maintaining the apps after funding had been approved. These members also opined that the Administration should step up promotion to encourage the use of such apps.

12.   The Administration advised that the digital inclusion mobile apps for underprivileged groups were funded on a one-off basis. The organizations receiving the funding were required to provide the Administration with post implementation reports one year after the apps were launched. The Administration would follow up the performance of the funded projects for a period of up to three years. A wide range of promotional activities including

press conferences, seminars and training classes, leaflets, online promotions, advertorials, etc., were organized to foster awareness of the apps.

Outreaching services for institutionalized and "hidden" elderly

13.　　At the ITB Panel meeting on 12 May 2014, members noted that the Administration had commissioned three elderly service organizations, namely the Po Leung Kuk, the Evangelical Lutheran Church Social Service—Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Welfare Council Limited, to implement ICT outreach programmes for institutionalized and "hidden" elderly.　With relevant expertise and service networks, the three selected organizations would reach out to these seniors and tailor-make activities to help them use tablets and arouse their interests in ICT.

14.　　According to the Administration, as at May 2014, 21% of the elderly had used the Internet.　The target in the longer term was that 50% of the elderly should have used the Internet, smartphones or tablet computers in three years' time.　At Panel members' request, the Administration provided information on the increase in percentage of elderly who had used the Internet over the past ten years and the elderly's adoption in other overseas cities/economies, which was circulated to members vide LC Paper No. CB(4)179/14-15(01) on 20 November 2014.　According to the Thematic Household Survey on Information Technology Usage and Penetration, Internet adoption among the elderly in Hong Kong had been increasing steadily from 4.8% in 2004 to 26.7% in 2013 over the past ten years.

Web Accessibility Campaign

15.　　Some ITB Panel members noted that only 136 websites met the stipulated accessibility criteria and 31 mobile apps were awarded in the second round of the Web Accessibility Recognition Scheme.　These members opined that more efforts should be put in to encourage adoption of web accessibility by business and non-governmental organizations.　At members' request, the Administration provided information on the percentage of statutory and public sector organizations that had adopted more stringent web accessibility standards, which was circulated to members vide LC Paper No. CB(4)179/14-15(01) on 20 November 2014.　As advised by the Administration, as at October 2014, 31 (39%) out of 79 statutory and public sector organizations had adopted more stringent web accessibility standards[4] in their corporate websites, reflecting an increase of 8% in comparison with 2013.

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[4]　The websites have achieved more stringent web accessibility standards such as criteria for award under the Web Accessibility Recognition Scheme organized jointly by OGCIO and the Equal Opportunities Commission or World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Content Guideline version 2.0 Level A/AA standards.

Recent development

16.   At the special FC meeting on 30 March 2015, Hon Emily LAU sought information, among others, on the Government's efforts and expenditure to encourage the development and application of ICT-related assistive technology for PwDs and the elderly. According to the Administration, in the past three years, OGCIO had launched two rounds of the "Funding Scheme for Development of Digital Inclusion Mobile Apps" to support the development of assistive tools for persons with special needs, including a tool to assess and train phonological abilities for persons with hearing impairment, a learning app to assist students with dyslexia to learn Chinese characters and radicals, a tool to help visually impaired students learn mathematical skills, an app to facilitate communication in sign language for persons with hearing impairment and an app to provide cognitive training to persons beset with dementia cum an aid for their carers to locate them. The total expenditure for the two rounds of the scheme was about $6 million.

Latest position

17.   The Administration will update the ITB Panel on 13 April 2015 on the latest progress of various digital inclusion initiatives, including the ILSP.

Relevant papers

18.   A list of the relevant papers with their hyperlinks is at:
http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr15-16/english/panels/itb/papers/itb_ea.htm

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