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Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting

Meeting on 16 February 2016

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, including 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 families¹ leverage technology, enhance their quality of living and connection with the society. The current digital inclusion initiatives include:

- (a) 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 the elderly; and

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 ILSP. The Internet Access Subsidy provides cash subsidy on Internet access charges to eligible families and offers economical Internet services and complementary support to parents and students. ILSP 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 Committee² ("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 ILSP) since July 2011. The Government commissioned eInclusion, 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 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 ILSP in the eastern part of Hong Kong. The baseline services delivered by the Implementers under 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 on using computer equipment and the Internet; and

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

- (f) free social support on proper and safe use of the Internet.

Previous discussions

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 ("NGOs") and the private sector to bridge digital divide and leverage the capabilities of information and communications technology³ ("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 benchmarks to measure the progress and effectiveness of the digital inclusion initiatives.

Funding Scheme for the Development of Digital Inclusion Mobile Applications

6. At the ITB Panel meeting on 13 April 2015, members noted that in the past three years, the Administration had lunched two rounds of the "Funding Scheme for the Development of Digital Inclusion Mobile Applications" ("the Funding Scheme") to support the development of assistive tools for persons with special needs. Under this scheme, funding support is provided for NGOs to develop mobile applications ("apps") to cater for the special needs of their service recipients. The developers for the apps were selected by the relevant NGOs in accordance with an open tendering process. NGOs receiving the funding were required to provide the Administration with post implementation reports after the launch of such apps. Members urged the Administration to step up promotional efforts to increase download counts of the mobile apps and to monitor the selection process of the developers.

7. Some members raised concern whether measures had been taken to assist the recipients, in particular the hidden elderly, in using the apps and to ensure information security for such recipients. The Administration advised that with relevant expertise and service networks, the three organizations selected by the Administration, namely, Po Leung Kuk, Evangelical Lutheran Church Social Service — Hong Kong and Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Welfare Council Limited, would reach out to these elderly people with tailor-made activities to help them use tablets and arouse their interests in ICT.

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

The developers and the service organizations were reminded of information security and privacy issues in designing the mobile apps and conducting seminars on using the apps for the recipients.

8. Some other members also expressed concern about the low percentage of download counts for "eElderly Activity Search" in the first round of the Digital Inclusion mobile apps and enquired about measures taken by the Administration to promote such apps for the elderly. They suggested that local elderly centres could assist in the promotion in this respect. The Administration advised that it had promoted the mobile apps through the relevant NGOs and at information technology ("IT") events held in the Hong Kong Digital Life Carnival. The Administration would continue to step up promotional efforts to introduce such apps to the elderly.

Web Accessibility Recognition Scheme

9. Some members raised concern about efforts put in by the Administration to promote and encourage adoption of web accessibility by private organizations. The Administration advised that it would continue to step up efforts to foster awareness of the web accessibility campaign. Under the Web Accessibility Recognition Scheme, participating organizations were provided with free assessment and advisory services to help them understand and meet the technical requirements. The Administration also sought to reinforce good practices of these organizations through prominent recognition and publicizing their achievements to attract emulation by others.

Internet Learning Support Programme

10. As regards ILSP, the ITB Panel noted the alleged irregularities in the implementation of ILSP in the past few years. Some members expressed concern about the way forward for ILSP, in particular the handling of cumulative doubtful debts and bad debts resulting from delinquent instalment payments for computer equipment and broadband services. According to the Administration, the Implementers of ILSP would review all the delinquent cases on an individual basis. Families with genuine financial problems would be followed up by social workers, and their debts could be written off if deemed necessary. Appropriate measures and processes to handle such cases had also been put in place to minimize similar occurrences.

11. The ITB Panel also noted that ILSP would complete its five-year term by August 2016 and the Administration was making preparations for another review to consider the way forward of the programme in the light of its effectiveness, the latest development of IT in Education and the service needs among students from low-income families.

Finance Committee

12. At the special FC meeting on 30 March 2015, Hon Emily LAU sought information, among other things, 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, the two rounds of the Funding Scheme supported 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 Funding Scheme was about \$6 million.

Latest position

13. The Administration will brief the ITB Panel on 16 February 2016 on the promotion of digital inclusion.

Relevant papers

14. 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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