**MAURITIAN government RESPONSE**

Call for Inputs: Study on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats

**1. Main challenges that young people face in accessing digital education.**

Digital literacy is a crucial component of modern education. Mauritius recognises the right of everyone to education, which is guaranteed by the Education Act. As from 01 January 2024 free education from pre-primary to tertiary levels is provided in all Government institutions. The Early Digital Learning Programme has been fully implemented in Grades 1 to 6 with a view of democratising access to digital education.

Policy actions have been adopted to upgrade educational infrastructure and logistics and ensure that schools are equipped with technological resources. Subsequently, post-COVID actions have been geared towards overhauling teaching and learning strategies to cope with school closures and disruption of the schooling activities.

The Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology (MoETEST) has successfully ensured continuity of learning during the pandemic of COVID-19. Minimum loss of learning related to digital education is aimed for. Emerging challenges including:

1. **Access**: Access to digital devices and reliable internet connections may not uniformly be available to all students.
2. **Skill Gaps in Technology Use**: There might be a lack of digital literacy and skills among some young people, especially those from regions with limited exposure to technology. This gap can make it challenging to engage effectively with digital learning platforms.
3. **Quality of Digital Content**: Ensuring that the digital educational content is of high quality, relevant, and aligns with the curriculum can be a challenge.
4. **Educator Preparedness**: Teachers and educators may face challenges adapting to digital teaching methodologies. Their ability to effectively use digital tools for education can significantly impact the quality of digital learning.
5. **Socio-Economic Factors**: Socio-economic factors such as family income, parental education level, and access to a conducive learning environment at home can influence the effectiveness of digital education for young people in Mauritius.
6. **Cybersecurity and Online Safety**: As young people spend more time online for education, they become increasingly vulnerable to cybersecurity risks and exposure to inappropriate content. Ensuring online safety is a key challenge.

**2. Promoting access to digital education.**

The Government of Mauritius has been actively taking steps to ensure that digital education is accessible and promoted among young people. Some key initiatives include:

1. **The National Open Educational Resources Policy (OER)** aims at providing access to students at all levels with free educational materials. Collaboration is ongoing with the Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO to enhance the capacity building of local human resources to produce additional OER materials for wide use. It is envisaged that the OER repository, currently hosted at the University of Mauritius will have links with smaller networks currently existing at primary and secondary levels.
2. **Learning and Teaching Management Systems in all public Universities**: All public Universities have been encouraged to set up a Learning and Teaching Management System which will allow seamless interaction between face to face and online education. The system would also allow for sharing of modules between institutions, and slowly lead to a better rationalisation of public resources at higher education level.
3. **Technology-Enabled Learning Policy**: Staff of each public higher education institution has been trained in the creation of online programmatic materials to be integrated in Bachelor programmes or higher. This initiative was done in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning and the materials produced has been uploaded on the National OER Repository.
4. **The Early Digital Learning Programme (EDLP)** aims at providing a tablet to each student from G1 to G6 in the primary sub-sector so that learning through digital medium become ubiquitous (anytime and anywhere).
5. **The Digital Proficiency Certificate** is an initiative of the Mauritius Digital Promotion Agency (MDPA) which hosts an approved syllabus and works in consultation with the MoETEST to make sure that students aged 16-17 have harnessed the essential and necessary digital skills to be digitally literate.
6. **Digital Mauritius 2030 Strategy**: Launched in 2018, this strategy is designed to ensure universal access to high-speed internet across the country. It plays a crucial role in equipping educational institutions with the necessary digital infrastructure to facilitate effective learning and teaching experiences.
7. **Technology Education Pathway for Grades 10 and 11**: As part of ongoing educational reforms, this pathway has been introduced to diversify the educational offerings at the secondary level. It focuses on integrating technology into the curriculum, thereby preparing students for a technology-driven future.
8. **Government Programme 2020-2024**: This programme emphasises the importance of education in the Government's inclusiveness agenda. It outlines plans to provide textbooks and e-books, free of charge to students in certain grades, improve access to educational facilities for students with disabilities, and invest in facilities to promote dual and vocational training. Additionally, it includes setting up an Institute of Technical Education and a National Skills Development Strategy, which will address new trends influencing skills development policies like Industry 4.0 and Artificial Intelligence.
9. **Distribution of tablets to vulnerable families**: The National Empowerment Foundation in Mauritius is distributing tablets to vulnerable families to promote equitable access to digital education. This initiative aims to bridge the digital divide, ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can participate in the increasingly digital-focused educational landscape. It underscores the government's commitment to inclusive education and digital empowerment for all young people.
10. **One-day package of free internet connection at $0.33 by the internet provider**: In Mauritius, internet providers have introduced a cost-effective one-day internet package at just $0.33, aimed primarily at supporting educational access. This initiative is particularly beneficial for students and educators, providing an affordable solution to access online educational resources and platforms. It aligns with efforts to ensure uninterrupted learning, especially in situations where long-term internet plans might be financially burdensome. This move represents a significant step towards digital inclusivity in education, enabling more students to participate in digital learning and stay connected with the educational community.

**3. Steps taken to ensure that young people can realise their human rights online in a safe, empowering, and inclusive way.**

The Government of Mauritius, along with various organizations, is taking several steps to ensure that young people can safely, empoweringly, and inclusively realise their human rights online. Key initiatives include:

1. **Respect of online data rights**: All Higher Education Institutions are registered as Data Controller with the Data Protection Office and have to abide to strict requirements ensuring the privacy of data in their possession.
2. **Cyberbullying** is not allowed and children are protected by virtue of the anti-cyber bullying laws passed. The IT Unit of the Police advocates for the safe use of the internet and carry out talks protects and sensitisation campaigns at schools. It protects students against abuses and misuse of the internet.
3. **The Information and Communication Technologies Authority (ICTA)**, as the national regulator for ICTs in the Republic of Mauritius, has published a Guide to provide Mauritian consumers of ICT products and services relevant information to help them better know their rights and responsibilities. It also came up with a centralised Online Content Filtering solution to filter access to child sexual abuse (CSA) sites for internet users in Mauritius.

Furthermore, it carries out Outreach Programmes for Youth in Educational Institutions in order to educate and empower students to make informed choices in the digital world. Apart from educating students on dangers of the internet, the Program also covers the rights of children online and the penalties associated under Mauritian laws regarding offences related to cybercrime.

1. The Government through the **Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-MU)** of the Ministry of Information Technology, Communication and Innovation conducts awareness campaigns together with the regular publication of necessary guidelines on online safety and children protection. Policies and cybersecurity legislation have been introduced or updated to ensure a safe online environment for young people. The CERT-MU has established a user-friendly reporting mechanism for online threats, cyberbullying, and inappropriate content, allowing young people to report incidents easily. It also conducts regular sensitization campaigns in primary and secondary schools, community centres and also on the national radio and television channels to sensitize students, youngsters, teachers and parents on the threats that can be encountered online.
2. **Child Online Protection (COP)**: This global initiative, which Mauritius is a part of, focuses on creating safe, gender-sensitive, age-appropriate, inclusive, and rights-respecting digital environments for children and young people. It involves raising awareness about online safety, assisting in the development and implementation of national frameworks for child online protection, and promoting the holistic protection and empowerment of children in the digital environment. A document guideline has been produced by the Mauritian Computer Emergency Response Team Enhancing Cyber Security in Mauritius.
3. **M-Kids’ "Cyber Savvy Kids" Workshops**: This initiative by M-Kids, a leading organization dedicated to the well-being of children in Mauritius, focuses on educating and empowering vulnerable children about online safety and responsible digital behaviour. The workshops provide a safe learning environment where children gain essential knowledge and skills about online safety, digital literacy, and self-protection strategies in the digital world.
4. **The educational campaigns of the Mauritius Digital Promotion Agency (MDPA)**: The MDPA emphasizes empowering young people to use technology safely and responsibly. MDPA advocates for regulatory measures that support safe online engagement for young people, such as risk-based approaches tailored to specific online services and providing parental tools to manage children’s online experiences.
5. **Other measures in public education institutions to prevent misuse of digital technologies**
* The Internet Usage Policy for schools is based on the GINS Internet Usage Policy, which outlines the strategy to protect students and ensure a safe use of internet at school.
* Filtering on internet is carried out through firewalls located centrally at the Data Centre of the Government.
* Monitoring of internet is carried out at Zone and Headquarters levels through network monitoring tools for users who bypass security. Warnings are issued to these users.
* Use of mobile phone is monitored at school level and is allowed for pedagogical use only. School rules and regulations provide guidelines on use of mobile phone on the school premises.
* Parents are sensitised during Parent Teacher’s Association meetings.
* Sensitisation and awareness on dangers of technology form part of social skills taught in SEN institutions.

These above steps taken by the Mauritian Government reflect a multifaceted approach to ensuring a safe, empowering, and inclusive online environment for young people in Mauritius, balancing technological opportunities with the protection of young users' rights and well-being.

**4. Gaps and challenges to young peoples’ protection from online threats in law, policy, and practice.**

Mauritius came up with a new Cybersecurity and Cybercrime Act in December 2021which caters for the emerging threats that can occur in the cyber world and takes on board best practices. Citizens of all walks of life can either report directly on a dedicated platform and directly to the Police Station of their locality. Further, sensitisation campaigns target all marginal and vulnerable groups equally.

**5. Steps taken to ensure that young people are protected from online threats.**

The Government of Mauritius has taken steps to ensure the online safety of young people through enactment of legislations as follows:

1. **Children’s Act 2020**: This act represents a significant legislative reform aimed at protecting the safety and well-being of children in Mauritius. The Act specifically makes provisions to protect children from violence, exploitation, abuse and criminalises cyberbullying and provides for online crimes to be punishable by law.
2. **Information and Communication Technologies Act (ICTA) Amendments**: Amendments to the ICTA include clauses imposing heavy sentences for online messages that may be considered aggravating. The amendments have reinforced penalties for supposed online abuses, with the potential for up to ten years in prison for sending a message via the Internet that causes or could cause “inconvenience” or other vaguely defined disturbances.
3. Furthermore, the **Computer Emergency Response Team of Mauritius (CERT-MU)** has been set up. It plays a pivotal role in protecting young people from online threats. Established under the Cybersecurity and Cybercrime Act 2021, CERT-MU's mandate includes coordinating cybersecurity response activities, promoting cybersecurity at the national level, monitoring internet threats, and taking appropriate remedial measures. Its mission is to ensure the safety and security of Mauritian cyberspace, strengthen cyber resilience, and educate citizens about cyber threats, which includes measures aimed at protecting young people in the digital environment.

These measures reflect Mauritius' commitment to adoptions of legislations and an appropriate framework to address the complex challenges of digitalisation.

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