

## **E-education: A virtual dream for many public school students**

For almost a decade, government has had on the cards plans to bring information and communication technology into the classroom. For a number of reasons, the plans have yet to be realised. As a result, many public school pupils continue to be at a significant disadvantage.

It might sound *passé*, in 2012, to recommend that a government should fund and pursue an e-education programme, but that's precisely what the Fiscal and Financial Commission recommended in its submission released to the media on Monday.

The e-education programme should be funded from government's operating budget in the way teacher salaries, school buildings and other teaching aids are, the commission's submission said.

The FFC, a Chapter 9 institution, makes annual submissions to Parliament with recommendations on the division of state revenue across national, provincial and local government and across different focus areas such as education, job creation and poverty alleviation. Strongly rooted in using innovation to tackle poverty, Monday's submission was made for the financial allocation process that will culminate in the finance minister's 2013 budget speech.

“(In the submission) the commission addresses government's slow progress in rolling out e-education, which has the potential to produce better education outcomes, greater completion rates and better prepared learners,” FFC acting chairman Bongani Khumalo said.

Khumalo said if properly funded and implemented, an e-education programme could level the current state of unequal education by providing pupils in poorer and rural areas with access to knowledge and quality education they might not have otherwise had.

Tania Ajam, one of the FFC's commissioners, cautioned that the consequence of the continued delays in implementing the e-education programme would be that pupils from poorer and rural schools would end up even further behind than they currently are in an increasingly digital economy.

In 2004, the education department published a white paper on e-education which set this ambitious goal: “Every South African learner in the general and further education and training bands will be ICT capable (that is, use ICTs confidently and creatively to help develop the skills and knowledge they need to achieve personal goals and to be full participants in the global community) by 2013.”

The FFC's submission said little data is available on e-education expenditure, which is surprising given that government had set this goal in 2004 and just over a year is left before it is supposed to be realised.

“This should be remedied through reporting on e-learning budget allocations and expenditure and, more broadly, on e-education in the annual reporting process. Explicit financial data will

enable a better analysis of the strengths and weaknesses relevant to achieving the policy goals of the white paper on e-education,ö the submission said.

Despite the lack of data, indications are that the policy has failed to take root and the implementation, which is a provincial department competency, has been uneven. The recently released e-Learning Africa Report 2012 identified limited bandwidth and infrastructure, the lack of trained teachers and lack of security as some of the factors that limit e-learning in South Africa.

In addition, the policy framework around ICTs in the classrooms has failed to keep pace with the rate of technological advances. The effects of this can be seen in the National Association of School Governing Bodies launching a recent bid to ban mobile phones in schools because they were a ödistractionö.

With predictions being that the slow rollout of broadband infrastructure will see smartphones even further outstrip computers as the primary mode of internet access, particularly in infrastructure-poor areas, such bans on mobile phones might hold public school learners back as their private-school counterparts revel in the [new technology](#).

The FFC also recommended establishing an e-Education Commission to act as an advisory body to the national and provincial education sector on designing e-education, and that government should work across departments to address the factors that have so far scuppered the e-education policy.

The submission will be presented to the appropriations committee in June and will form part of the inputs into next year's budget. Only then will we know whether this recommendation on e-education has been taken seriously. **DM**

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