

FINANCIAL AND FISCAL COMMISSION
POLICY BRIEF
**e-EDUCATION IS A CRUCIAL
 PLATFORM FOR IMPROVING
 EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA**
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief promotes key intervention areas for national and sub-national governments to achieve effective and efficient financing of e-education.

The world is shifting towards knowledge-based economies. To produce inclusive growth, South Africa needs to produce successive generations of well-educated young people who contribute to socio-economic development. The *White Paper on e-Education* was adopted in 2004, yet financing of e-education is limited in the national and provincial spheres of government, except for Gauteng and the Western Cape. The performance of e-education across the education system appears to be sub-optimal, which could exacerbate the 'digital divide', marginalising further poor and rural children from participating in the emerging knowledge economy. Yet, if properly funded, e-education can contribute to improving the quality of education.



BACKGROUND

During their time at school, the majority of the 12.1 million learners in 24 681 public schools in the nine provinces (DoBE, 2011¹) acquire only limited knowledge, and a very large proportion fail to complete 12 years of schooling (FFC, 2011²). This poor quality of education negatively affects South Africa's capacity to compete in an increasingly skills-intensive global economy. It limits the ability to create economic value and prevents an increasing proportion of the population from participating in economic production at reasonable rates of reward, often referred to by the government as 'decent jobs'. The country's basic education system requires many interventions in order to increase capacity and accountability for performance. These include leadership, good school governance and increased access to knowledge for both teachers and learners. Yet, although new technologies can enhance learning, e-education is poorly financed.

The failure to finance effectively e-education increases the current inequalities among school leavers, as poor learners cannot access new technologies. Some students can improve their access to knowledge and their employability by using information and communication technologies (ICT) such as smart phones and e-books, but the majority cannot. This exacerbates inequalities in the broader society, as learners from poorly resourced schools are often unemployable or employable only in very low-income, low-skilled jobs. Equitable financing of the infrastructure and skills required for ICT-enabled access to knowledge can remove barriers that prevent poor and rural youth from participating productively in the emerging knowledge economy.



1 DoBE (Department of Basic Education). 2011. Report on the 2008 and 2009 annual surveys for ordinary schools. Pretoria: DoBE.

2 FFC (Financial and Fiscal Commission). 2011. Annual Submission on the Division of Revenue 2012/2013. Midrand: FFC.

EXISTING POLICIES

The Department of Education was one of the first government departments to introduce policy for integrating ICT, which is one of the goals of the White Paper on e-Education (2004). The policy foundation for e-education appears to be relatively comprehensive, located in various components of the government machinery. As the policy anniversary of 2014 approaches, this foundation will require reviewing and updating because technology and digital content production has advanced considerably in the past decade. For instance, a decade ago access to email was sufficient, but now broadband internet access is a pre-requisite for effective e-education. Many innovations are also available that can bring e-learning to schools at a reasonable cost (e.g. the emergence of mobile phone internet access).

Since schooling is a provincial function, the main budget that will be used for e-education lies in the provinces. Yet ideally e-education is a major long-term policy initiative and so should be a specific item in the national and provincial budget allocations. A review of historical and projected expenditure found that e-learning has been underfunded. Expenditure on computer services is significantly greater in the planning programme than in any other programme. Yet, if e-learning were a funding priority, expenditure on computer services would be expected to be greater in the curriculum policy, support and monitoring programmes. In fact expenditure on these programmes has declined over the years. The relatively low expenditure on communication also indicates a very limited e-learning focus, as efficient communication systems are the anchor for delivering e-learning services.

POLICY OPTIONS

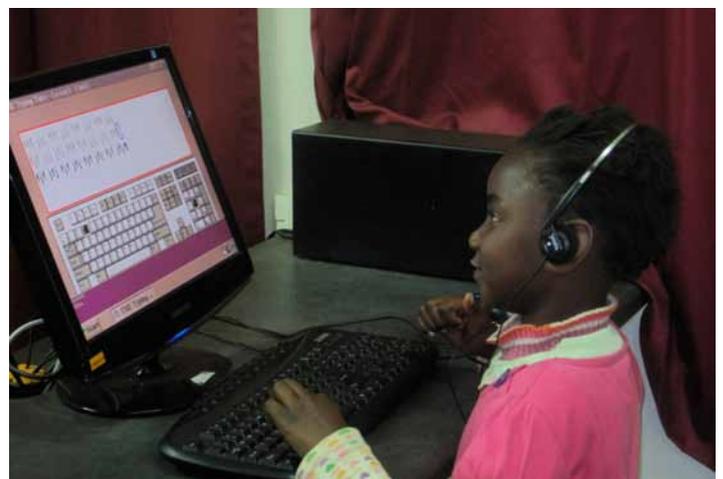
Reasons that may explain why the e-education challenge is not being met include the need for:

- (a) Concerted cultural and technological adaptation.
- (b) Specific e-education knowledge and leadership at national and provincial levels, as education is a concurrent function between national and provincial government.
- (c) Explicit budget allocations for e-education at national and provincial levels, coupled with monitoring and evaluation to track progress on improving ICTs,
- (d) Supporting strategies and funding from institutions such as the Department of Communications, ICASA and municipalities,
- (e) Public accountability for policy implementation in the education ecosystem.

The Commission recommends that:

1. The e-education policy should be funded as a part of the government's operating budget for the programme, just like teacher salaries, school buildings and other teaching aids.
2. A well-structured inter-governmental financing mechanism should be established with explicit guidelines to provincial departments of education regarding the budget line items to be prioritised in the annual provincial education budget allocations.

The country's basic education system requires many interventions in order to increase capacity and accountability for performance.



3. The national and provincial education sector receives firm and expert guidance on designing e-education, and such expertise should relate to e-education, not merely to information technology.
4. The annual reporting process should include (a) reporting on budget allocations and expenditure on e-learning, and more broadly on e-education, and (b) continuous assessment of the impact of e-education policy and financing.
5. Greater emphasis should be given to overseeing the implementation of the e-education policy, noting in particular the sub-output "Enhance research, development and innovation in human capital for a growing knowledge economy".



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