

Minister's Statements and Speeches

THE FINANCE (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL

(No. XI of 2023)

(18.07.2023)

The Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology (Mrs L. D. Dookun-Luchoomun): Mr Speaker, Sir, the Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (No. XI of 2023) comes as an important instrument to effectively implement Government policies during the course of this financial year and beyond. This Bill provides the legal framework for the implementation of some crucial policy measures pertaining to the early childhood care and education, secondary education, technical and higher education subsectors.

Mr Speaker, Sir, there has always been a powerful social demand for education because it has been seen as a social leveller, as a means of empowering a person in shaping his life, improving the social status as well as being a source of personal growth and development. Today, education is free across both the schooling and the higher education subsectors and as from January 2024, the Government has decided that we will be closing the loop through the enactment of the policy of providing free pre-primary education.

It is now common knowledge, Mr Speaker, Sir, that it is during the early years of a child's life that a sound foundation is established for his future: emotional, physical and cognitive development. It is also that period of time that the trajectory, the contours of the learner's holistic development are defined. It remains therefore period that amply merits a strong investment.

Mr Speaker, Sir, pre-primary education is dispensed by the State but also by private providers. The same applies to all the other subsectors of education. However, there has always been a missing dimension; the primary and secondary subsectors have been duly and freely catered for as has been the case recently for the tertiary subsector. The wheel now comes full circle through the introduction of free pre-primary education and that, Mr Speaker, Sir, has required the courage, the vision and the commitment of the Prime Minister to the cause of equitable education for all.

Mr Speaker, Sir, despite the fact that we can boast of a gross enrolment rate of 102% at that level, there is unfortunately a wide diversity in the quality of the offer. Free pre-primary

education will thus aim at ensuring that each and every child has access to the right pedagogies to achieve the readiness required to join the primary sector. The very basis of such a measure is of course to ensure that the pre-primary schools are adequately equipped and have the appropriate infrastructural facilities in place to provide a conducive environment for learning.

It is this Government's conviction that quality pre-primary education be affordable to all and should in no circumstances, be tied to financial means of the family. Accordingly, Mr Speaker, Sir, my Ministry is currently finalising the Grant-In-Aid formula that will come into force for the free pre-primary education scheme as from January 2024. The Early Childhood Care and Education Authority will be called to play a prominent role in the administration of the Grant-In-Aid scheme. In this regard, Mr Speaker, Sir, the Authority is organising meetings with the managers of private preprimary schools and will be presenting to them the modalities of the Grant-In-Aid (GIA) Scheme.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Finance Bill is bringing about a number of amendments to the ECCEA Act. I will not delve into all the provisions but I will highlight only some of the salient ones. Mr Speaker, Sir, the Finance Bill is providing for the ECCEA Act to be amended to provide for the introduction of a new definition in subsection 2 of the Act for terms "pre-primary school" and "aided pre-primary school". It is also providing for the inclusion in section 4 of a new object of the Early Childhood Care and Education Authority to enable it to ensure that pre-primary schools are managed in accordance with relevant laws, rules, guidelines, directives and standards. The introduction in section 5 of new paragraphs to include in the functions of the Authority, the operation of the Grant-InAid scheme, the payment of grants, the inspection and auditing of the accounts of the schools.

Further, Mr Speaker, Sir, the amendments proposed also address governance issues by reviewing the composition of the Board in section 6 of the ECCEA Act to avoid any situation of conflict of interest. Furthermore, with a view to ascertain that issues and aspects of inclusive education related to that subsector are taken on Board, provision is being made for the representative of the Special Education Needs Authority to be included on the Board.

Mr Speaker, Sir, amendments at section 10(b) of the ECCEA Act aim at empowering the Authority to establish criteria and conditions for the payment of grants to the schools subject to them satisfying these criteria and also, for the payment of salaries in respect to the staff of the grant aided pre-primary schools.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the legislation will also entail a few consequential amendments to the Education Act. At section 3(2), two additional responsibilities are being entrusted to the Minister. These are –

- (i) the formulation and publication of policies and criteria for the registration of pre-primary schools, and
- (ii) the promotion and maintenance of high quality standards in these schools through the setting up of an appropriate quality assurance mechanism.

Mr Speaker, Sir, all these amendments are being made to ensure that the Grant-In Aid system being put in place is adequate and caters for the needs of the sector.

Questions were raised, Mr Speaker, Sir, by the hon. Leader of the Opposition regarding the actual mechanism being put in place. Mr Speaker, Sir, as I have mentioned earlier, it is being worked out and it is being finalised. In fact, we are coming up with certain measures to ensure that all pre-primary schools have adequate means to provide to the students a conducive environment for learning and also to provide them with all the resources needed for them to be able to have within the school all educational resources that are required in the subsector. Salaries for teachers and other personnel of the schools will be taken care of by the Early Childhood Care and Education Authority.

Mr Speaker, Sir, amendments are also being brought in the secondary subsector. The education sector is allocated a budget of Rs19.7 billion. It is incumbent upon my Ministry to ensure accountability for every penny spent. Accountability, accordingly, has to be accompanied by transparency, the two fundamental pillars of good governance. It is in this context, Mr Speaker, Sir, that sections 11, 12 and 13 of the Education Act are being amended. With regard to section 11A, subsection (2) is being repealed such that it will no longer be possible for a person to cumulate both the functions of Manager and Rector of a secondary school. It is only legitimate to have a clear separation of duties and responsibilities. Clarity is ensured through the demarcation of lines of responsibility of each party.

At section 12, provision is being made for the issue of a Certificate of Registration to a Manager on an annual and renewable basis. As for the amendment to section 30, the emphasis is on additional conditionality relating to the appointment of a fit and proper person as a Manager of the private secondary school. It is unfortunate, Mr Speaker, Sir, that in a number of cases, industrial disputes are not resolved and lie dormant due to the inability or

unwillingness of the Manager concerned to thrash them out. This has led to some unbearable situations for staff members in certain schools. Mr Speaker, Sir, this amendment will help to improve the state of affair.

The Finance Bill, Mr Speaker, Sir, also make amendments through Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE) Act. Allow me to come to this other important element of the Bill with respect to the MIE Act. The Chairperson of the MIE Council, Mr Speaker, Sir, is appointed by the Prime Minister under section 10(3) (a) of the MIE Act. The MIE Act (1973) also provides for its Council to include, *inter alia*, the Chairperson of the Public Service Commission. This is an anomalous situation, Mr Speaker, Sir, for it is not deemed proper for the Chairperson of a constitutional body appointed by the President after consultations with the Prime Minister and the Leader of Opposition to sit as an ordinary member of the Council. Hence, the amendment to the legislation will no longer require the Chairperson of the PSC to be part of the MIE Council.

On the other hand, Mr Speaker, Sir, a representative of the Special Education Needs Authority has been included as a member of the MIE Academic Board. This is in keeping with the principles of equity and inclusion that my Ministry honestly promotes. This will guarantee that the needs of students with special needs and disabilities are well catered for. To these ends, sections 10 and 11 of the MIE Act have been amended accordingly.

Mr Speaker, Sir, allow me now to come to another amendment of the Education Act in which we all have a keen interest, that of recognition of the efforts that our learners put in. The High School Certificate Pro is a qualification equivalent to the HSC. It aims at establishing bridges between the school and the world of work. Along with their academic studies, students undergo structured work placements to develop their employability skills, making them better prepared for the world of work. Section 33 of the Education Act concerns the inclusion of two scholarships for the most meritorious boy and girl from the HSC Pro stream.

I will now come, Mr Speaker, Sir, to the Mauritius Qualification Authority Act. Mr Speaker, Sir, the technical and vocational education and training sector is also undergoing considerable development. As is the case for the tertiary education sector where the High Education Commission is working towards making the high education system more responsive, resilient and relevant to the need of society, so is it for the TVET sector. We also want the learners embarking on TVET programmes to be provided with similar life chances and opportunities.

Allow me to explain, Mr Speaker, Sir. The term ‘micro-credential’ has become part and parcel of the language of learning. A micro-credential is a form of certification of an individual’s discreet learning and achievements. This, as we all know, is also referred to as ‘bite-sized learning’ which is a small volume competency acquired through life experience, work or study. These, when combined, can provide credits towards formal qualifications.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the MQA Act is being amended to include at section 2 the definition of the term National Credit Value and Transfer System, and it is stated that it will have the same meaning as in the High Education Act. In section 5 of the legislation, amendments have been brought so as to empower the Qualification Authority to have two new functions, namely

- (i) the approval and recognition of micro-credentials in the VTET sector, and
- (ii) the monitoring of the implementation of the National Value and Transfer System in the sector to facilitate mobility of employees and also lifelong learning.

Amendments to section 18 enable the board to make regulations on matters related to recognition and equivalence of qualification and the implementation of the National Credit Value and Transfer Systems in the sector on the National Qualifications Framework.

With these amendments to the MQA Act, the board is being empowered to recognise the non-formal and informal learning and help widen access to formal education system. It will help employer identify candidates who have the fit for purpose set of skills. Furthermore, it will facilitate the transition of employees from one workplace to another.

Mr Speaker, Sir, we have been encouraging the uptake of continuous professional development as well as lifelong learning processes that are conducive to capacity building and development. The MQA has made major inroads in recognition of prior learning, and we intend to build on that. I wish to add here, that in May this year, the Special Education Needs Authority in collaboration with the Commonwealth of Learning enrolled 459 experienced SEN learned teachers in six stackable modules provided the Commonwealth of Learning through the Skilled for Work Programme. The UTM has on its part proposed to take on board these six modules and provide five additional stackable modules as a top up that will lead to a certificate in Special

Inclusive Education pitched at level 5 of the NQF as a continuum of the programme offered by the Commonwealth of Learning.

Mr Speaker, Sir, what we are doing right now is to recognise the experience of people who have been working for a long time in a sector, the recognition not only of their work experience, but also the possibility to allow them to learn and to stack up the different modules that they have learnt so as to eventually provide them with a formal certificate.

Mr Speaker, Sir, joint tertiary education with African universities form part of the Finance Bill. With a view of giving a further boost to attaining an aim of transforming Mauritius in an education hub, local universities are being encouraged to establish strong inter-institutional networks and alliances, especially with institutions on the continent to which we belong. This necessitates a degree of incentivisation for those institutions of higher learning moving forward in that direction.

The Income Tax Act is being amended at section 67 by inserting a new subsection 67Q. This provides the possibility of a registered High Education Institution having entered into contract with an African university to provide joint tertiary education with the final year being done in Mauritius. These institutions will be in the position to deduct from their gross income twice the amount of any expenditure incurred on the cost leading to the conclusion of the contract. This will be valid for the incoming year where the contract has been established and excludes costs of a capital nature.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the Institute of Technical Education and Technology Act (2021) which provides for the establishment of the Institute of Technical Education and Technology (ITET) was assented to on 23 July 2021. It is currently formalising its organisational chart and proceeding with the determination of its general and specific conditions of service. As we know, the ITET has already been declared and approved as an approved service for the purpose of the Pension Act on 16 May 2023. This would naturally trigger increasing interest of job seekers in taking up career opportunities at the institute.

Additionally, with this amendment to the Statutory Bodies Pension Funds Act, employees already in the public service and wishing to join the Institute will be able to carry forward not only their accumulated work experience but also their accrued pension benefits and years of pensionable service. In this context, clause 81 of the Bill accordingly provides for the Statutory Bodies Pension Funds Act to be amended to include the Institute of Technical Education and Technology in the First Schedule of the Act. This will enable employees, as I

have said earlier, of the ITET to contribute to the pension fund just like those of other statutory bodies.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I am pleased to note that the provisions of the Finance Bill 2023 cater for a series of measures that are multifold and that will impact on all sub sectors, from the pre-primary to the tertiary sub sector. They will also help alleviate the financial burden of families. In fact, today, parents having children who are studying in fee paying universities, locally or abroad, will be benefiting from tax deductions of Rs500,000 over a period up to 6 years.

Mr Speaker, Sir, education is about facilitating the growth and development of an individual as from early childhood till he or she reaches the age of young adulthood. So many years of a young person's life must be looked after in gingerly and sensitive manner. Our Government has always made it its bounded duty to provide relief wherever it is needed. Thus today, a child up to 3 years of age will be provided with a monthly allowance of Rs2,000. The parents or legal guardians will have the possibility and the responsibility of satisfying the diverse needs of a growing child through that allowance and also, it will be a means of inculcating the savings culture in our young people right from the early age such that a responsible consumerism becomes the norm as the child grows up.

Mr Speaker, Sir, as we know, as from the age of three, the child, adolescent, young adult enjoy free education across the levels. As learners, they are entitled to free education, non-payment of exam fees, free bus transport, free textbooks from Grades 1 to 9. We also have the one-off independence allowance for those who reach the age of 18. We are now completing the process and creating an opening for a positive early start as they take their first steps into the world of adulthood.

Mr Speaker, Sir, allow me at this point to congratulate my colleague, the Minister of Finance, and his team as well as the Attorney-General's Office on the tremendous efforts that have been put in the preparation of this enabling Bill with not less than 90 pieces of legislation that have been amended. Their efforts will not go waste, Mr Speaker,
Sir.

Thank you for your attention.