**Minister’s Statements and Speeches**

**PUBLIC BILLS**

**THE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY BILL**

**(NO. XXVII OF 2019)**

**(17.09.2019)**

*Order for Second Reading read*.

(5.31 p.m.)

**The Minister of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research (Mrs L. D. Dookun-Luchoomun)**: Madam Speaker, with your permission, I move that the Skills Development Authority Bill (No. XXVII of 2019) be read a second time.

Madam Speaker, this Bill needs to be situated in its proper context. Today, there is universal recognition of the fact that the global economy is changing and changing fast, that in itself requires workers that they be at once innovative and flexible as well as adaptive. In this changing configuration, the mastery of skills becomes a prerequisite whether this be cognitive, socioemotional, digital or again technical.

Now that the Fourth Industrial Revolution is upon us, we all know that this spells dramatic change for the world of work. In fact, it gives rise to debates and dialogues on the very future of work. The unprecedented rate of automation is bringing wide ranging changes to jobs, staffs and skills required in various sectors. These primarily are in the form of robotics, artificial intelligence and other technologies. So, let us face it.

Globalisation and ageing workforce, skills shortages and mismatch, shrinking birth rates in different parts of the world haveshown then a new era in the technical and vocational education, skills development and upliftment. In Mauritius like elsewhere there is an immediate need to rebrand and modernise the TVET ecosystem today to plan and deliver on future skills.

According to the 2019 World Economic Forum Report entitled ‘Strategies for the New Economy Skills’, shifting to a system where skills are the core currency of the labour market posits a number of benefits. For one thing, it has the potential to tackle existing inefficiencies in the job fit between employers and employees and for another, it helps to prepare us for the future that is likely to bring great volatility in the labour market. In short, it enhances opportunity, prosperity and equality for workers for greater employability. Of course, there are other implications as well. Our modern day technological disruption and the changing nature of work are giving rise to a changed world of learning and work. This requires a move, away from traditional front-loaded accreditation and side-load certificates to a system of lifelong learning infused with the shared sets of skilled-based indicators at its core.

Madam Speaker, we, in Mauritius, are fully alive to these issues. This Government in its Vision 2030 has placed its sights quite high. We want to have Mauritius step up to a high income status economy and a smart island State through the development of a high skills ecosystem. Now that the foundation is strong and the national educational reform is at an advanced stage of implementation, the skills level of the Mauritian population must be further raised to improve job prospects, productivity and competitiveness, and also to support the deployment of its new economic pillars. Operationalising these new pillars necessitates proper planning for and capacity building of a skilled manpower and its professionalisation.

Today, we recognise the significance of skills as a major engine of development, as a vehicle for social equity, inclusion and sustainable development. We must admit that until now, TVET and skills development were not the favoured options for learners. Accordingly, one central feature of our educational and training system reform agenda is the rebranding of the TVET sector and its transformation into an attractive, modern one through massive investment in state-of-the-art infrastructure, simulation driven training equipment along with new models of industry immersion and workplace learning.

In that, Madam Speaker, others have, in fact, shown the way. Industrialised and emerging countries such as Singapore, Germany, South Korea and India have had to equally transform their quality ecosystems to facilitate the transition to an advanced technological and skilled-based economy. Thus, in 2015, the Government of India launched the flagship TVET campaign titled ‘Skills India’ with the aspiration to train 400 million young persons in 7 years as a means to drive economic gains, promote social mobility as well as trigger a productivity dividend for enterprises.

In 2016, Singapore, on the other hand, enacted the Skills Future Singapore Agency Act and as a new dedicated legislation to further reinforce its manpower planning and strengthen its skills base for the emerging sectors. Germany and South Korea have also infused a new dynamism and made significant investments to revamp their technical and vocational infrastructure. This, they have done through reengineering of their STEM Agenda so as to undertake the shift from mid to high end niche markets.

So, as you see, we are on the right track, Madam Speaker. In the wake of the reform initiatives and the adoption of a digital Mauritius, there has been a diversification from basic to mid to high technical and vocational education and training. MITD has been engaged initially in the provision of basic training to support the first level of our industrial development and is now called upon to transition to another level.

As regards Polytechnics Mauritius that has been set up, it has embarked on innovative and Cutting Edge Programmes such as Artificial Intelligence, FinTech, Internet of Things, green technologies, medical and paramedical areas and so on and so forth.

Madam Speaker, hon. Members would also wish to know that my Ministry has enlisted the support of our international partners, the European Union and the World Bank in the context of the reform agenda. Following consultancies on the institutional framework relating to skills development in Mauritius, a major recommendation related to the need to revisit the TVET landscape such that the roles and functions of relevant institutions be better geared towards skills development. It goes without saying that this spells a need to revitalise the quality assurance dimension in line with international trends.

As the House is aware, as per the Higher Education Act, the Quality Assurance Authority has been set up as a separate independent and autonomous body responsible for quality assurance while the Higher Education Commission focusses on registration of institutions and accreditation of programmes. Following the same principle, Madam Speaker, we are aligning this new policy orientation of the TVET sector by having a new institution that will address the quality assurance dimension of the sector.

Madam Speaker, our public institutions operating in the TVET sector have well defined statutory objects and functions, each fulfilling the roles ascribed to them. Whilst the HRDC is mainly responsible for the planning of the human capital development, the MQA, for its part, is tasked with the registration of training providers, accreditation of programmes and maintaining a national qualification framework, the main public training service-providers being the MITD and Polytechnics Mauritius.

That being said, in our training landscape, there is still felt an urgent need to succinctly and effectively address a number of issues, including quality assurance and the development of relevant skills framework. Such issues are best addressed through the setting up of proper regulatory bodies.

Madam Speaker, the Skills Development Authority Bill considers all the imperatives and constitutes an important piece of the transformation process. The Skills Development Authority will have one overarching mission in that it will act as a platform to foster constructive public/private dialogue and address future-oriented skills development in a sustained manner.

Madam Speaker, allow me now to introduce to the House the main provisions for the Skills Development Authority Bill. The Bill provides for the establishment of the Skills Development Authority, which shall be a body corporate operating under a Board of Directors. Clauses 4 and 5 of the Bill spell out the objects and functions of the Authority. The Authority will regulate the provision, delivery and quality of training according to the present and future skill needs of the economy. It will ensure quality assurance in the TVET sector through the conduct of independent quality audits. It will set in place a system to ensure quality at all levels of the provision of training, that is, right from the inception to the final evaluation.

Another important objective of the Authority pertains to the conferment of awarding powers to training institutions. This will be applicable to well-established institutions once they would have shown that they meet the requirements of the prescribed criteria.

The Bill, accordingly, provides for the establishment of criteria for institutions to have awarding powers. These include their performance over a given period of time and their credentials. Guidelines and rules about the governance of awarding bodies will be prescribed by the regulatory body. The process will involve a high level of scrutiny and assessment prior to the conferment of awarding powers.

Madam Speaker, another objective of the Bill is to provide for the development of a Skills Framework for the present and future occupations across the different economic areas. The establishment of the Skills framework will help to better guide the employees, the trainees and the training providers in matching skills development with the needs of business and industry. In addition, the skills framework will provide greater clarity on skills and career pathways. Further, it will create a common skills language for trainees, training providers and employers.

Madam Speaker, another objective of the Bill is to setup and maintain a Skills Development Fund. I shall be elaborating further on this Fund that is provided for at clause 21.

Let me now come to the quality assurance component of this Bill. The Skills Development Authority will put in place a quality assurance system both in the processers and their outputs. Such a system will enable the providers of training to address any gap on a continual basis and produce quality skilled outputs. On the one hand - sorry on the other hand, we all recognise the significance impact of quality assurance on ascertaining the employability of learners.

Further, ensuring relevance to the world of work and focusing on skills outcome will drive the positive perception and image of TVET especially bearing in mind that the Mauritian experience and expertise are being constantly thought in the region.

Madam Speaker, clause 5 part (f) relates to an important function of the Authority which is the setting up and maintenance of a register of skills and skilled persons. There is a dire need for trained persons with required qualifications, skills and expertise such that they operate according to standards and codes of practice that will ensure both quality and consistency. This will, in particular, guarantee that the elements of health and safety are also upheld. The Authority will range for the assessment of the different skills and maintain a register of those who satisfy the skills framework.

Clause 5 (i), Madam Speaker, provides for the Authority to foster international collaboration in skills development. The way forward, Madam Speaker, is and will always remain collaboration. Institutional collaboration and the promotion of the culture of sharing of whatever knowledge acquired is now the norm. The Skills Development Authority will see to it that gaps and skills are readily addressed through partnership with specialised institutions and multilateral organisations. This will provide greater scope for transfer of knowhow and new technologies.

Indeed, Madam Speaker, the world of TVET is one where technology is duplicitous and as an essential task of the Authority will be to engage in communicating judiciously in a connected world especially considering the necessity to provide meaningful and accurate information to the public with regard to TVET.

Madam Speaker, as in all legislations, clause 6 of the Bill is a general provision and powering the Authority to acquire, hold and dispose of assets and employed funds to defray expenses as per its functions.

As for clause 7 of the Bill, provision is made for the Authority to be administered and managed by Board as a main decision-making organ. It will comprise a Chairperson, appointed by the Prime Minister and a Vice-chairperson from the private sector. Provision is also made for a fair and adequate representation of members both from the public and private sectors which include members who has experience in TVET, business and industry.

The TVET office of the Board of Directors will be for a period of 3 years with the possibility of renewal. The conduct of the meetings of the Board is provided at clause 8 while clause 9 deals with the disclosure of interest of members of the Board in line with the principles of good governance.

As for clause 10, it empowers the Board to setup committees for specific purposes to assist it in the performance of its duties.

Madam Speaker, provision is made at clause 11 for the appointment of a Director who will, *inter alia*, be responsible for the execution of the decisions of the Board, including projects and programme management and for the control and management of the Authority.

Clauses 12 to 16 are standard ones which provide for the delegation of Authority with regard to activities of the Authority; the appointment and condition of service of employees as well as protection from liability in the execution of duties done in good faith.

Madam Speaker, I wish to highlight the incorporation of provisions for the reinforcement of the regulatory powers of the Skills Development Authority. The Authority, being a regulator in the TVET sector while ensuring quality assurance at all levels, will need to have a strong inspection and enforcement arm. Hence, clause 17 and 18 provide for inspection and enforcement. The Authority will establish an inspectorate division and elaborate an inspection programme to carry out visits, both announced and unannounced with a view to monitor and ensure compliance with the provision of the regulation. This division will be manned by professionals in the sector and will operate within a set framework.

Madam Speaker, clause 19 of the Bill makes provision for the Authority to have the power to summon any person to appear before it so as to give information or produce any document relevant to any inspection, examination and investigation. Obviously, Madam Speaker, in all fairness, any person who feels aggrieved by any decision of the Authority should be invested with the right to make an appeal against it. This is taken care of in clause 20 of the Bill. The aggrieved person is expected to lodge a written notice of appeal together with grounds of the appeal. An independent Appeal Committee to be chaired by a barrister will be set up to advise on the subject matter of the appeal.

Madam Speaker, the Authority will need resources to finance its activities. In this context, clause 21 makes provision for the setting up of the Skills Development Fund and the money paid into it as well as for the disbursement of funds. It will finance the activities, programmes and projects that it would undertake to promote skills development including promotion of partnership and resources to consultancy services.

Clauses 23 to 28 relate to miscellaneous provisions of the Bill which include the need to comply with principles of good governance, the publication of annual reports of the FDA as well as the audited accounts at the end of each financial year.

The Bill equally makes provision at clause 29 for regulations to be made. This would relate to procedures, conditions and criteria in respect of quality assurance in the TVET sector, conferment of awarding powers to training institutions and the setting up of the skills framework.

With a view to ensuring that pension benefits are transferable to relevant employees and bodies of similar status as per the Pension Act, the Authority shall be an approved service. The FDA in addition will be a public body that shall be made to comply with the provision of the Public Procurement Act as per clause 30 subsection 1 of the Bill.

Madam Speaker, this Bill will be a landmark for our technical education landscape. It will fill in the existing gaps by synergising the regulation and the quality of provision of technical education effected by both public and private sectors and this for the very first time in our country. Through the enactment of this legislation, we are setting the scene for a new and improved regulatory framework, in complementarity and in consultation with existing stakeholders in the system. We are ensuring the enhancement and expansion of the quality dimension for the sector, but we are also looking ahead and making provision for future growth especially at a time where many of the new skills of tomorrow are not even here today. The bottom line is that the greater the boost given to the image of TVET, the higher its capability to attract learners for higher level of skills development.

Madam Speaker, let me now conclude my intervention. We all in this House sincerely believe that Mauritius is destined to have an ever brighter future and, as a forward looking Government, we are duty bound to provide the right guidepost so that Mauritius attains a vision that we have carved for it; a vision that secures the deep engagement of all stakeholders for higher productivity.

This Bill, Madam Speaker proposes to enhance the attractiveness of the TVET sector as an item upper most on our agenda.

What is equally noteworthy is that the Bill critically expands the availability of information and skills. This is particularly important at a time where the need of the economy and the skills needed for our workforce are constantly and dynamically evolving. I wish to emphasise that this Bill is future focussed and that it prepares the ground to leap from towards a set of high end skills within proper regulatory parameters. We are now effectively rebranding the TVET Sector by boosting its image and thus ensuring the provision of skilled human capital for the national development.

Madam Speaker, with these words I commend the Bill to the House and I thank you.