

**Address by Hon. (Mrs) L.D. Dookun-Luchoomun,
Minister of Education, Human Resources,
Tertiary education and Scientific Research.
Launch of Massively Empowered Classrooms,
The Virtual Campus of the Mauritius Institute of Education.
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Good afternoon to all of you.

Today, as you have heard from previous speakers, we are celebrating what may be deemed to be a unique occasion, not only for the Mauritius Institute of Education, but also for Mauritius and Africa as a whole. It is a matter of pride and honour that the **Massively Empowered Classrooms** platform gets to be launched in our country, especially in a context where there are very few such Classrooms in the world.

This project has had the support and collaboration of Microsoft. Let me once more recognise Mr Sriram Rajamani who is warmly welcomed for this official launching.

My Ministry's partnership with Microsoft goes back a long time and, as regards this Project, I am all the more appreciative of Microsoft's support as it fits in perfectly with my vision for education for our country.

In fact, this Virtual Campus is called upon to address one of the most important concerns of my reform in education: that of empowering, initially, teachers and, subsequently, learners so as to maximise their potential through the use of appropriate technology.

I strongly believe that the provision of the Massively Empowered Classrooms of Mauritius will be instrumental in realising fully the far-reaching aim of our reform agenda.

For this is a reform that looks to the future.

It is a reform that accepts as inevitable that learners of today will face a world that will be increasingly characterised by uncertainties about the nature of work of the future.

Our learners will all face new demands that neither they nor we can even foresee.

Hasn't it been said that the top ten most sought-out jobs in 2010 did not exist in 2004? Hence, we are called upon to prepare children for jobs that might not exist today. More importantly, we are called upon to prepare children for a society that will be substantially different from what exists today.

What implications does this have for the traditional classroom we have been used to so far?

Bluntly put, the bloom is off the rose for the traditional classroom.

We all know that we have to enable our learners to move away from the current state of unquestioningly taking in whatever comes from the teacher as an information source.

The modern context and, especially the oncoming challenge-filled tomorrow demand that learners emerging from schools should be critical, creative and innovative thinkers. They are also expected to be effective communicators, collaborators and autonomous lifelong learners. There is no question of dealing with life with a business-as-usual approach.

Remember that famous quote from Plutarch:

“The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled”.

What is needed is a new tool-set, a new skills-set and a new mind-set.

Overall, therefore, the reform seeks to enable the child to develop skills for lifelong learning, to develop the characteristics of an autonomous learner, and to adapt to the challenges of living and working in a world that will take a new shape as s/he grows into adulthood.

Obviously, ladies and gentlemen, this has major ramifications for Educators as well as for decision makers who have to marshal and usher in the right policies for action.

I believe that one of the solutions to our uncertainties about the future inevitably rests on IT and digital technology. Digital technology offers the possibility to optimise human abilities and capabilities, to improve our performance several fold with a degree of perfection and sophistication that no human being cannot attain on his or her own. Growing knowledge and inventions have resulted in challenging and questioning the status quo.

Also we are now in apposition to grasp the possibility that many more people can be users of sophisticated technology than we dreamt of only a few years ago. For instance, drones deployed by the American army, which we only used to read about just a few years ago, now have become so common as to become Christmas gifts to our kids. The same can be said of the internet which initially began as a military tool but has today become a potently dominant force in the public arena.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Perhaps we should also see technology as an equaliser in its own right. You and I—in fact, all right-thinking persons believe in equity and justice.

We believe in a society that gives a fair chance to all and where being an “elite” is not the exclusive preserve of some alone.

Education is the leveller. It helps in building a just and fair society. If we want more children to succeed and be prepared for the future, we must ensure all of them get the very best.

I accordingly see the MIE Massively Empowered Classroom (MEC) as one such tool for the democratisation of knowledge, for the provision of access to knowledge with the possibility for just-on-time learning.

Let it be clear that, in an environment where children now have access to WIFI and mobile devices, connecting to the virtual classroom will help them to make better use of the connectivity. Programmes like the School Net, under the aegis of the Ministry of Technology, Communication and Innovation, are the means that help us to ensure that the school makes up for what the child may lack at home.

Dear Friends,

I will not today speak lengthily on the technicalities and positive spin-offs of virtual classrooms—I would rather leave that to experts. Suffice it for me to say that this technology will help us move into 21st century learning; it offers opportunities for sharing amongst peers, be it teachers or students; and, above all, it encourages collaborative learning, building friendships and bridges within and across generations.

But there is a caveat, a powerful one at that.

All this can only become really successful if we, the adults, teachers and school leaders, also espouse this vision.

I would therefore urge all of you present to understand that the world demands a new way of proceeding, a new approach to teaching and learning.

In fact, with the onset of the Nine Year Schooling reform, we are also banking on the use of *online evaluation* in the long run. This will only

be possible if we are prepared to embrace technology and feel at ease with the methodology of online education.

My Ministry is there, in collaboration with the Ministry of Technology, Communication and Innovation, to provide the necessary fillip to the process.

Thus, we are about to provide tablets to all children in Grades 1 and 2 and, progressively, to all grades in Primary, as well as to all secondary schools. Obviously, this demands a strong infrastructure to sustain the system.

That will be looked into.

And ushering in this technological innovation also places a premium on the empowerment of all teachers and schools. I am told that the MEC will host online courses, as well as upload resources and materials for Educators' Continuous Professional Development. These will be easily accessible, downloadable, and offer a place where learners can interact and receive quick responses and support.

I also believe that the system will empower Educators to contribute, to become co-creators of knowledge, and benefit from their joint efforts. It is obvious that those who are willing and able to share and embrace this technology will be the ones to benefit in the long run.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is one other benefit that the MEC brings to Mauritius and that merits a mention.

For a long time, Mauritius has mostly been a consumer of technology. We have always been trying to follow or catch up with others. But we hadn't been able to leapfrog as we had always aimed to.

Today, there is possibly one very important message for all of us to take from here.

We are all set to become one of the few leaders in Massively Empowered Classrooms rather than just followers.

I feel extremely proud to be heading the Education sector at this opportune moment and am glad that, in keeping with its role as a catalyst to forge the future that we want for our children, the MIE is leading the way to the future of classrooms.

So, let us all engage in this new adventure. Now that Mauritius will have its MEC, I am sure it will serve as an example to other countries. I am also confident that we will continue to receive the expertise and support of Microsoft to make the best of this opportunity.

For our part, we would also be prepared to promote such ventures elsewhere in the region and beyond, once we are ourselves comfortable with what we have achieved in this domain. But we learn fast—we are *willing* to learn fast and we know that, as the African idiom goes, ‘it is easier to bend a stick while it is still wet’.

I therefore look forward for Mauritius and the MIE to be quoted respectively as a success story and as an institution that is looking far beyond what is immediate. This geographically unique MEC comes at an opportune time to help MIE grow further and engage in a ‘360 degree thinking’ process.

My message today is also addressed to you, the Heads of institutions gathered here today. Get involved, get your teachers to embrace technology and rest confident that the MIE will offer professional development opportunities for all those who willing to get their feet wet. On this note, I would once again wish to extend a special word of thanks to Mr Sriram Rajamani for his presence and his support to Mauritius and the field of Education.

I wish you all plenty of success as we embark on this new adventure. I will certainly keep a close eye on the opportunities that will arise out of this innovation.

I thank you all for your kind attention.