

Speech by Hon. (Mrs) L.D. Dookun-Luchoomun
Minister of Education & Human Resources,
Tertiary Education and Scientific Research
Ceremony for the Award of Scholarships to learners with
Disabilities,
Thursday 02 February 2017

Distinguished Guests

Parents and Dear Students

Introductory remarks

I am indeed very happy today that my Ministry has been able, within a short period of six months, to implement a major measure-- that of providing opportunities to, and encouraging the access of, students with disabilities to tertiary education.

As you are aware, this was one of the measures enunciated in the government program 2015-2019. To make that a reality, provision was made in 2016/2017 budget for the launching of this special scholarship scheme for students with disabilities to pursue post-secondary studies locally.

I have absolutely in hesitation in saying that this Award marks a new beginning for learners with disabilities in the Republic of Mauritius. We are here seeing a classic case of ***Inclusion in action***, a move away from mere rhetoric to practical and ground actualisation.

Purpose of the Scholarships

Let me at the very outset indicate the very purpose of awarding scholarships to the most meritorious candidates.

It goes without saying that Education is *the* instrument that leads to the eradication of poverty. Indeed, one of the most significant roles of education is to help change the world and make it a better place to live

in. This demands the participation of one and all, the parity in participation of all learners, whether they are with or without disabilities.

We are therefore duty-bound to ensure equity in the system.

And equity itself demands that we compensate learners for the efforts put in to achieve higher performance.

This is at once a moral and an ethical obligation

Today's ceremony becomes then a **mark of recognition**. We want to recognise the efforts put in by you, dear Awardees; we want to recognise your commitment, your perseverance and your determination not to allow any hurdle to cause you to deflect from your goals and aspirations.

Hearty congratulations for that.

Barriers to Inclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We know of so many countries where there is a high level of discrimination against persons with disabilities. These persons are unfortunately not only physically or otherwise challenged but also challenged by the opprobrium cast upon them.

Discrimination exists at different levels.

- It is **attitudinal** in nature, especially when it comes to the very people who are around them and who deliberately choose to discriminate against them.
- It is also **institutional** as well as **physical**.
- In yet other cases, it is **informational** in that they are debarred from benefiting from the advantages provided by information and communications technology (ICT).

Affirmative Actions in Education

Fortunately, in Mauritius, we are working towards ensuring the situation is not that critical. Hence, in the domain of education, we have undertaken a number of affirmative actions. We have created supportive conditions for learners with disabilities:

- **Access/outreach programs** help bring children to attend educational institutions;
- The **curriculum** has been **elaborated** for different disabilities. Thus, the curriculum for 4 types of disabilities-- Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment, Intellectual Impairment and Autism -- has already developed;
- **Capacity building programs** have been mounted for teachers and non-teaching staff of all NGOs engaged in the sector; and
- **Five Special Education Needs Resource and Development Centres** have already been set up in the island to offer specialized services

It should also be noted that the **grant-in-aid payable to NGOs** running Special Education Needs School has been increased by 50% in the recent budget.

On the other hand, we are **creating a disabled-friendly environment** by retrofitting Schools with ramps/handrails and constructing adapted toilets

Strategy Paper for the SEN Sector

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have constantly asserted that the Sector Reform program my Ministry has initiated is not a piecemeal but a systemic one. In this program, I do not intend to leave learners with disabilities on the wayside.

Accordingly, I have insisted upon the formulation of a Strategy Paper for the SEN Sector. We are in the presence of proposed international

technical support in the elaboration of the Paper and I can today announce that a zero draft of the document is expected by the end of March 2017.

A word for Awardees and Parents

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I must congratulate and commend the five selected candidates who will soon be awarded the scholarships. You must have modelled yourselves on the achievements of many of your friends in different fields of activity. It is now certain that, through the scholarships you so justly deserve, you will in turn be role models for others in the years to come. May I here seize the opportunity to reassure all parents that my Ministry will leave no stone unturned to ensure that all learners with disabilities are taken on board as per our vision for the SEN sector.

Do also rest assured that my Ministry, with the support of government, will provide full support to all learners with disabilities such that they complete their respective courses with flying colours.

On this note, congratulations once again to the awardees and the parents and relatives present here today.

A special word of appreciation and thanks for the Prime Minister for taking time out for this Ceremony.

Thank you all for your kind attention.