HKBU's Views & Comment On
The Digital 21 Strategy 2007

1. Objective

This paper outlines the views of the Hong Kong Blind Union in responding to government's public consultation on the revised Digital 21 Strategy (the strategy) to be released in early 2007.

2. General

We propose that "Digital Inclusion", like before, should be a separate initiative of its own.

The "Building a knowledge-based community" initiative aims at how to further enhance the skills and knowledge of those groups who can already get access to Ict facilities and have also acquired the basic knowledge of their use. In contrast, the "Building a digital inclusive society" focuses on narrowing the gap between those lagging behind and the better-take-up or better-connected in the use of ICT and Internet.

According to the latest survey, the Pc penetration rate in Hong Kong is well above 70%, but the number of people within the blind community who can get access to ICT facilities is still very low. We anticipate that combining the "Knowledge—based community" and "Digital inclusion" into one initiative will shift the focus in the former and further widen the gap between the better-off and the disadvantaged groups in the use of ICT.

3. Web Accessibility

We are disappointed to see that Web Accessibility promotion programme has been taken out from this version of the strategy. We strongly recommend this programme should be maintained as a major agenda in the Digital Inclusion initiative.

Despite the fact that the government has been promoting web accessibility since 1998, majority of the websites in the education, cultural and business sectors are still inaccessible to people with vision impairment.

The landscape of the web is ever evolving and the recent so-called "web 2.0 applications' which allows user to be more than a spectator and to become a participant. In the ICT-advanced countries, the web 2.0 accessibility has become a hot topic for discussion due to its profound impact.

The premature elimination of web accessibility programme in the strategy will undoubtedly debilitates vision-impaired people (VIP) in the use of the web and widens the gap of digital divide.

To further strengthen the adoption of barrier-free web design in the community, in addition to promotion activities, we propose an automatic web accessibility evaluation tool for Chinese websites to be developed and the establishment of a hotline to provide consultancy service to the private sector on web accessibility.

4. ICT in Education

While our younger generations can now exploit Ict for enhancing and enriching learning, students with vision impairment are deprived of this benefit as they are often posed with barriers in accessing e-learning software and websites in schools and tertiary institutes. For example, most of the e-learning websites in Hong Kong are largely inaccessible to vision impaired people. We do not discourage the adoption of new technologies and perceive their advantages in making learning richer and more enjoyable. Nevertheless, we need an equivalent accessible version to be made available to us. We urge the government to take measures to alleviate the situation.

Since 2002, vision-impaired students in the mainland are provided with an option to allow them to take the open high school examinations with the help of personal computers. We propose the government to explore the possibility of similar arrangements.

5. Digital library

Traditionally, vision-impaired people (VIP) rely on Braille or audiotape books for leisure reading and studying. The process of transcribing a printed book into a Braille or audiotape format is both error-probed and time consuming, and hence greatly limited the reading scope of the VIP.

Currently, it is estimated that less than two per cent of books are translated into formats that VIP can use. In a recent survey conducted by our union, it is found many of the local students with sight problem cannot get hold of text-books in accessible

format not until near the time of examinations, or even after the end of the school term.

Nowadays, the advancement in ICT, such as optical character recognition (OCR) and text-to-speech (TTS) technologies, has drastically expedited the production of books in text-file or digital audio format. In addition, digital books can be stored in the highly portable PDA or MP3 machines so that people on the move can listen to books anytime anywhere.

Many digital libraries have been successfully set up in many advanced countries. Newspaper, magazines, text books and books for leisure reading can be downloaded through the Internet. The service is beneficial to people with print disability, including the vision-impaired, the dyslexia and those who have difficulty in turning pages.

Everyone should have the right to read. In aiming for the goal that VIP to be able to access the same books at the same time and the same price as everyone else, We call upon the government to help set up digital library service in Hong Kong so that local publications in digital accessible format can be made available to people in need.

6. e-Government

We welcome the policy of customer engagement during the implementation of electronic public service delivery projects. Our union will be pleased to provide our views and support in making government services more accessible to people with vision impairment.

We propose more e-democracy, such as e-consultation and e-forum, to be developed so as to facilitate VIP to participate. In particular, e-voting, with the provision of speech-enabled voting kiosks, will definitely be a booster for VIP to vote in the future elections.

We also urge the government to allocate more resources in projects which exploit ICT (e.g. RFID, GPS, mobile devices) to help VIP travel in the city more independently and safely.

7. Assistive Tools

Our view in this area is that foreign-made assistive tools are often come with a prohibitively high-price tag and thus are unaffordable by majority of the PWD, who are among the low-income groups. Due to the fast moving ICT, new versions of assistive tools have to be developed to keep in pace with the mainstream products, including operating systems (OS) and applications. Hence, while we welcome the provision of subsidies for PWD in the acquisition of foreign-made tools, this approach may not be a long-term solution. In parallel, the government should also e encourage the industry, academia and the related NGOS to develop these tools locally. Several assistive tools have been successfully developed locally during the past few years. They may not be as powerful as the foreign-made ones, but can meet the basic needs of most home users.)

In view of the above, we propose paragraph 7.16 in the strategy to be re-phrased as follows:

> *"ICT creates the opportunity for the disabled to achieve parity and independence in more areas of their lives. There is a need to provide subsidies for the acquisition of advanced assistive tools. In addition, more resources will be provided for the development of assistive technology so that affordable assistive tools are made available to disabled people. They also require technical support in the use of these tools."*

Prepared by

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