

Stakeholders urge the government to come up with policies that can bridge the gap in ICT learning in schools.

BY TOBBIAS JOLLY OWINY

The Education and Sports ministry has stated that secondary school learners nationwide will only be allowed to possess smartphones and other ICT-related gadgets in schools after the government enacts specific policies permitting their use.

The revelation was made this week by Mr Abubaker Bbuye, a principal education officer at the ministry, during the launch of a new report on the readiness of Uganda's secondary schools to implement digital learning. Mr Bbuye warned that allowing secondary learners to bring smartphones and mobile gadgets to school for ICT integration, without proper ministry gatekeeping, could have serious consequences.

"I do not want to commit myself until we come up with the right kind of guidelines, because giving them the computers or the machines in their hands without guidelines would be the worst case. We are coming up with guidelines to allow that to happen, not simply just giving them out," Mr Bbuye explained.

He added: "Some schools are letting this happen—the students even have phones, but they only use them on strong school-based policies that dictate when, where and how to use these gadgets."

Mr Bbuye was reacting to calls by education sector stakeholders that the ministry should reconsider its position that banned possession of smartphones by learners in schools, arguing that it would significantly boost ICT learning in schools across the country.

Mr Robert Magemeso, a senior official at the Uganda National Institute for Teacher Education (UNITE), Kampala, while reacting to the findings of the research report, explained that allowing students to own the gadgets will close the urban and rural divide between learners and boost their performance.

"If possible, the ministry should consider permitting secondary school learners to have gadgets like telephones and tablets, and parents could be permitted to acquire those gadgets for the learners," Mr Magemeso said.

He added: "As we look into that, we need to put into our minds that the issue of disparity between the urban parents and the rural environments will come in the future, but the ministry should consider looking into this capability; otherwise, we might see the gap widening."

#### Under consideration

For more than a decade, the government has maintained the ban against handheld mobile devices such as smartphones, tablets, etc., for use by learners on school premises. This, it adds, is until a guiding policy is developed and passed. The policy will ensure teachers are taught how to use the machines in the classroom, and they will be able to design class activities and control how learners use the gadgets.

Some schools have policies where learners go with laptops, and they are stored in the classroom and are only pulled out for use once a teacher has prepared a lesson that requires ICT, Mr Magemeso further revealed.



Students take a selfie at school using a smartphone. There has been a raging debate on whether it is right for students to carry phones to school. PHOTO/FILE

## Govt hits pause button on phones in schools

On Tuesday, Education ministry officials, heads of schools, and other education stakeholders gathered in Gulu City for the launch of a report titled *From Unplugged to ICT-Ready, a Digital Readiness Assessment of Secondary Schools in Uganda*. The new report by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef), conducted in 3,257 schools countrywide, points to critical gaps that continue to constrain learners from embracing e-learning.

Ms Janet Akao, an education officer at Unicef Uganda, called for the fast-tracking of the policy since allowing individual students to own their personal gadgets will boost ICT learning among them. "With ICT, once you have access to it (equipment), you are more likely to know how to use it better and faster, and I know that, but what we are seeing is that there is a need for guidelines and frameworks for how devices are used in schools, especially in secondary schools, and the ministry should speed it up."

"The ministry is making efforts with the development of the digital agenda strategy. There are also efforts to develop guidelines for specific things like cyber security, data privacy, use of phones in schools, and for us to localise our digital learning, we need to mine about the educational resources," Ms Akao added.

#### Findings

The study established three distinct digital readiness profiles of Uganda's secondary schools, where it categorised 671 (20 percent) of the schools as ICT-ready with reliable electricity, stable internet, and better device ratios. It also classified 1,372 (41 percent) as semi-connected schools with electricity and some connectivity, but experiencing frequent disruptions, making consistent digital integration difficult for teachers. Another 127 schools (39 percent) were classed as completely unplugged schools, with no internet, limited electricity, and the highest learner-to-device ratios.



#### In the pipeline.

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#### Some proposals.

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have very different experiences of digital learning depending on their school's profile. One-size-fits-all approaches that disregard these differences can be inefficient for ICT-ready schools, or insufficient for unplugged schools, and may widen gaps rather than closing them."

The researchers explained that the situation was influenced by electricity reliability, internet access, and device allocation. The factors that the researchers reckon are also closely interrelated include: unreliable power makes internet access volatile, and internet access without adequate devices limits its value for learners. Understanding them together, the researchers added, is important for designing effective interventions.

Fifty percent of schools were found to have high access (16+ hours per day), 35 percent moderate (5-15 hours), and 15 percent low access (under 5 hours per day). "Among schools not connected to the national grid (17 percent), 72 percent rely on solar and generators (23 percent) for electricity access. These schools experience power disruptions daily. A school with fewer than 5 hours of daily power cannot meaningfully run a computer lab, charge devices, or deliver internet-based lessons," Ms Akao revealed.

When power is unreliable, digital learning risks complicating rather than supporting teaching and learning, and geographically, the gap is most pronounced between rural and urban schools, and between the Northern region and the rest of the country, she said.

#### Power deficits

Government-aided schools, which are more concentrated in rural areas, were found to be twice as likely as private schools to have low electricity access. Only 39 percent of government-aided schools reach high-level electricity access, compared to around 60 percent of private schools.

Among connected schools, internet reliability was also found to vary consider-

ably. Ms Akao said nearly one in three experience daily disruptions and a further 26 percent experience them weekly.

"This reliability gap is what distinguishes ICT-ready schools from semi-connected ones. The no-internet gap and reliability challenges are more concentrated in rural areas and in Eastern and Northern regions," she said.

The core challenge is not the number of devices in isolation, but the number of learners per device. Device ratios differ across readiness profiles: ICT-ready schools have a median of 29 learners per device, compared to 36:1 in semi-connected schools and 50:1 in unplugged schools, she added.

The study was commissioned last year by Unicef and the Ministry of Education with funding from the Mastercard Foundation to assess the ICT infrastructure needs in secondary schools, to find out information related to access, use and the capacities of schools for ICT integration.

It is meant to guide the strategies of implementing the Leaders in Teaching Uganda programme, a five-year (2025-2030) initiative that seeks to transform secondary school education in Uganda by improving the quality of teaching and learning in 2,091 schools across the country.

Of the 3,257 schools in which the assessment was conducted, 1527 were government-aided secondary schools (47 percent), 1040 were private community schools (32 percent), 521 private faith-based schools (16 percent), 17 were universities and one UNITE (Uganda National Institute for Teacher Education) campus.

#### What next?

Giving the example of her own school, Sr Hellen Lamunu, the headmistress of Sacred Heart (Girls) School in Gulu City, explained that unless the government invests in deploying more professional ICT teachers, fixing the gaps in ICT learning in secondary schools will remain a challenge.

Uganda has placed digital transformation at the centre of its national education agenda, committing through the National Digital Agenda Strategy (DAS) and the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2026-2030 (ESSP) to leverage technology to improve education quality and prepare learners for an increasingly digital labour market.

Ms Proscovia Aber, the Gulu City Inspector of Schools, said: "These findings, for the case of Northern Region Uganda, are worrying, because as the region is trailing in almost everything—internet connectivity, we are at the lowest, ICT infrastructure and electricity connection, we are still at the lowest, including the capacity of our teachers."

However, she expressed optimism that the education departments in districts across the region and stakeholders are working on policies that can help bridge the gap in ICT learning in secondary schools.

Meanwhile, Mr Bbuye admitted that the country lacks professionals and that a few who the government trained left for greener pastures. "We recruited a big number, and we gave them (instructors) the opportunity to go and study; they used their two years to get better qualifications and went elsewhere for greener pastures. If you had 106 recruited, only about 46 are in service; the rest went for better opportunities," Mr Bbuye said.

When reacting to the inadequacy of human resources, Mr Bbuye said the government is banking on a yet-to-be-disseminated research by the World Bank on the ICT-readiness in schools across the country.