

# FT View

## Future-readying youth

BY its own admission the Government is struggling with a challenging public financial situation with a Budget deficit estimated at 7% for 2019 and a stimulus package that is expected to see a sharp reduction in revenues at least in the first quarter of 2020 if not the rest of the year. Yet it is also pushing ahead with over 150,000 recruitments to the public sector, which will create a huge challenges for public finances.

Understandably the Government wants to win votes at the upcoming General Election. But it is also creating a pension time-bomb and hindering efficiency by tacking on even more appointments to an already-overloaded public service. So could Sri Lanka find a way to get youth well-paid jobs in a different sector and what could be done to encourage this?

According to the Census and Statistics Department, digital literacy stood at 42.4% compared to 29% for computer literacy for the year 2018. However, computer literacy has only recorded marginal growth, with 0.4% increase in 2018 compared to 28.6% 2017. The report surveys both computer literacy and digital literacy of Sri Lankans each year, and points to the Western Province leading the island in both computer and digital literacy, with 40% of the population considered computer literate. The Southern Province came in second position with 30% and the Eastern Province ranked lowest with 14.8%.

Internet access offers a powerful avenue for people around the world to assert their right to education, and to claim social, economic and political opportunities for empowerment. But half the world's population is still offline. Most of these 3.9 billion people are women, and most are in developing countries, with a significant number even being in urban areas.

Not knowing how to use the internet continues to be a significant barrier to digital inclusion, particularly for women and girls. Among the urban poor, women are 1.6 times more likely to cite lack of knowhow as a barrier to their internet access and use. Although ICTs are a powerful tool for developing literacy skills and accessing education, progress on providing internet access and digital literacy training in public schools has been painfully slow. The Government should act urgently to prioritise delivering digital literacy training as a critical component of school literacy curriculum across all education levels, along with reading and writing. It can do this by putting digital skills and education (particularly for women and girls) front and centre of policy agendas. Programs should be designed to boost the confidence and interest of girls, and focus on empowerment and rights, not just technical abilities. Providing internet connectivity to all public schools and investing in ICT training and support for teachers, replacing expensive proprietary textbooks and learning materials with open educational resources, pairing digital literacy with digital security and information literacy, and equipping students to protect themselves online and to create and critique (not just consume) content are some of the other ways. Analysing and addressing reasons for high female drop-out from STEM subjects and enhancing post-secondary STEM opportunities, especially for girls and young women, is another important need. Taking steps to eradicate the gender gap in access to higher and tertiary education by ensuring that women have equal access to tertiary education opportunities is important and in Sri Lanka English knowledge is also an aspect to consider. Sri Lanka has done well in reading and writing literacy and it's time to extend this success to digital literacy for a prosperous future.