Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.

I have the immense pleasure to be in your midst today for the validation workshop on norms and standards for SEN institutions. This forms part of our endeavour to ensure that the best possible facilities are offered to learners with SEN.

Above all, it is an integral part of my Ministry’s vision for an inclusive education for all.

You will recall that, only last week, the Government Programme 2020-2024 was presented by the President of the Republic, HE Mr Prithvirajsing Roopun, at the National Assembly. The Programme has an overarching theme, namely, “Towards an inclusive, high income and green Mauritius - Forging ahead together.” And you will all have certainly noted the first adjective used to qualify the Mauritius we want to see: a Mauritius that is INCLUSIVE.

Now inclusion is also one of the main driving forces behind the transformation in education which was initiated in 2015, a transformation that aimed at providing an education more adapted to the present and future needs of our youth, including those learners with special education needs.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Major players in the sector,

You will recall some time back we had a similar workshop for the validation for our Policy Framework and Strategy document which focuses on an “Inclusive Education for children and Youth with SEN in Mauritius: Concept to Reality”.

Allow me a quick refreshing of our collective minds about that Strategy document.
Its mission, as you know, is “to achieve inclusion by creating and providing a conducive environment to ALL learners that ensures equal access to relevant and quality education and training”, and it had been prepared in line with the internationally-agreed to Sustainable Development Goals as well as the Nine Years of Continuous Basic Education programme.

It is also important to keep in mind that the Strategy is based on the six E’s of the philosophy of Inclusion, namely, Equity, Equal Access, Equal Opportunity, Equal Dignity, Effective Communication and Embrace Culture.

I would also like to evoke that fact that one of the strategy goals of the policy paper was to set up a Special Education Needs Authority (SENA). This, having now been achieved, the Special Education Needs Authority Board, working in close collaboration of the Ministry, is now set to achieve its stated mission.

Of course, a number of actions and initiatives have already been set on the rails as part of the furtherance of the goals set. Increasing access for all learners of the Republic to an Educational institution has resulted in the provision of barrier-free access to learners with physical disabilities. Thus, infrastructural works are ongoing, in a phased manner, in various primary and secondary schools.

We have also implemented a scholarship programme for learners with SEN to pursue their post-secondary courses.

With regard to Special Education Needs Institutions, the Special Education Needs Authority has as mandate to ensure that all services provided, be they infrastructural facilities, human resources or curriculum-related, are according to the set Norms and Standards as we want the very best for our learners.
Quality, ladies and gentlemen, is another imperative. Here, there are several points to be kept in view, capacity building and professional development of the teaching staff being one of the most vital. The Mauritius Institute of Education has been pressed upon to provide the required professional support in this aspect by offering the relevant courses for teaching staff as well as for the personnel working in SEN institutions.

Another very important aspect is the use of technology. As announced in the last year’s budget 2019/2020, provision has already been made to procure Braille note to visually impaired students at the secondary level. I am pleased to inform you that a Memorandum of Understanding has been signed within a Government-to-Government Agreement with India to assist in the supply of Braille Notes to visually impaired students. It will also ensure the provision of training to these learners as well as the technical support for the maintenance of such sophisticated equipment.

Rest assured that the Ministry has at heart the wellbeing of all learners and will provide all necessary support. I do realise that, as Managers/ Heads of schools, you not simply have but are also living up to the huge responsibility of educating learners with SEN. I am aware of the efforts you are already making and I know with certainty that my Ministry will continue to enlist and enjoy your close collaboration in the interests of our children.

Ladies and gentlemen,

My personal and deep conviction has always been that the quality of services provided in our institutions, whether these are performance-, management- or, again, support-related, are a major determinant of efficiency and effectiveness. They are also a significant contributory factor to a safe, secure and conducive environment for all learners.
Norms and standards then become pre-requisites since they provide a set of criteria against which the quality of services can be measured.

I am informed that a Technical Committee had been working on the Norms and Standards and that the various agencies, whose approval and clearances are needed, have had the opportunity of clearly stating the pre-requisites for registration purposes. This was done in the course of a brainstorming session on Friday 31 May 2019.

Subsequently inputs were also sought from all stakeholders on the existing norms such that an upgrade of these latter could be envisaged. To be very honest, I am a bit disappointed that we have had inputs, not from across the board, but only from a few (eleven) NGOs.

However, ladies and gentlemen, today will be an opportunity to make good on what was a lost opportunity.

At this juncture, ladies and gentlemen, let me come to one issue for those of you who operate NGOs specialising in the provision of special education.

You are well aware that the SENA Act made a provision for a moratorium of one year to be provided to NGOs and other SEN Institutions such that they would complete all procedures and satisfy relevant criteria for registration.

Now that we are going to engage in the validation of the Norms and Standards, that would define clearly those criteria that will be a pre-requisite for registration, rest assured, Ladies and Gentlemen, that my Ministry is currently making arrangements for an extension of the moratorium.

In the meantime, you will be apprised of the changes brought to the Norms and Standards for SEN institutions. Do feel free, through today’s validation exercise, to bring your invaluable views on the information and proposals made and reach relevant consensus.

I do expect to have some valuable comments from you all.
However, your work will not stop there. Implementing the Norms and Standards would entail a number of follow-up activities. It would also imply undertaking some actions now, that you had previously deemed not felicitous. Nonetheless, I am convinced that you will all be “partie-prenante” in the sound observance and implementation of the defined and agreed-upon norms and standards.

Our learners with special needs deserve no less!

I now have the pleasure of declaring open the Validation Workshop on norms and standards for SEN institutions.

Thank you for your kind attention.