'Virtual Teacher' launch offers hope to SA education system

Vodacom and the Eastern Cape Department of Education have launched the 'Virtual Teacher' platform, a new interactive technology platform, which allows an individual teacher or lecturer to deliver lessons in real-time to multiple remote classrooms or locations, simultaneously.

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Through a range of smart devices, learners can join classes from anywhere and at any time. For the first time in South Africa, the technology can be accessed through any personal device. The move follows Vodacom's Programme for Mobile Devices introduced in the province earlier this year to promote the use of digital technology in Eastern Cape schools.

The platform is supported through portable hardware, which delivers high quality visuals and sound. It can also accommodate unlimited viewer numbers. The technology enables live interaction with the remote audience through a texting Q&A facility for written responses during the lesson.

Vuyani Jarana, chief officer at Vodacom Business, says, "Vodacom is working with the Eastern Cape Department of Education to address some of the challenges facing our education system, particularly in rural and underperforming schools. This is all about bringing innovative technology to those who need it most in order to improve learning outcomes for all education segments in our country. The future of the South African education system is digital and we must embrace the opportunities this offers to leapfrog infrastructural backlogs and legacy issues in our schools."

In order to improve the matric pass rate in the province, the Eastern Cape Department of Education will use the Virtual Teacher platform to provide extra classes to students at selected districts in the province. Lessons will be delivered remotely by some of the country's best teachers, with an emphasis on mathematics, science and accounting. Students from various locations will be transported to teaching sites in the Eastern Cape, including Mdantsane, Maluti, Lusikisiki and Mt Frere.

The Eastern Cape Department of Education's superintendent general, Themba Kojana, says, "The Department is promoting interactive virtual teaching and learning in the province, particularly in rural communities. Technology, such as the Virtual Teacher platform, allows teachers to interact with remote learners to increase their understanding of school subject material, with a goal to improve learning outcomes in the province."

The Virtual Teacher platform encompasses a camera, microphone and streaming unit, which can be streamed from any device. Lessons can be pre-recorded if needed and recorded content can also be downloaded to any device. The platform is easy to use and can be linked to a school website. Content can also be zero rated by Vodacom if required.