

Ukufunda Virtual School to address inequalities in basic education

The Ukufunda Virtual School, in partnership with Mxit Reach and UNICEF, was unveiled yesterday by the Deputy Minister of Basic Education, Enver Surty and the MEC for Education in Gauteng, Panyaza Lesufi.



Ukufunda, which means "learn" in isiZulu, is a mobile innovation in the South African education system that will promote equitable access to quality learning and teaching, enable teacher professional development and support curriculum delivery. Surty says, "I express my sincere appreciation to be present at this launch as we are realising our dream of strengthening support to our teachers. It is therefore pleasing to note the enormous contribution that is made by Mxit and UNICEF in supporting the various initiatives which our department has identified for purposes of improving the quality of teaching and learning in our schools, particularly those that are disadvantaged by the lack of appropriate resources.

"The Ukufunda Virtual School will directly address inequalities in the school system, raise education standards and put the power of basic education back into the hands of every learner, teacher and parent," he says.

Cost-effective and substantial positive change

Founded in 2005, Mxit is a proudly South African mobile innovation story and a company that continues to push boundaries and innovate around the potential of mobile phones to drive cost-effective and substantial positive change in our society. Mxit currently works on over 8,000 devices; from feature phones to smart phones and tablets, meaning just about every South African can easily access Mxit on their mobile phone. "We believe that one of our most important roles is to act as a technology conduit, linking experts such as the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and UNICEF and their content and services with the people who need it most," says Andrew Rudge, CEO of Mxit Reach.

Many past and current mobile phone-based education programmes in South Africa are focused on supporting learners

directly, but less, if any, are focused on enabling teacher development and support.

Two key components of Ukufunda is the calendar and Annual National Assessment (ANA) tool:

- The calendar tool allows the DBE to populate one central calendar with the annual school terms, exam timetables and beyond that will be editable at a provincial, district and school level. What makes this calendar so resourceful is that it removes traditional communication barriers such as access and affordability.
- The ANAs are assessments of grade three, six and nine learners' levels of competency in literacy and numeracy. Conventional assessments can be costly, time-consuming and can take several months for results to be returned. The ANA tool for Grade 9 learners on Ukufunda provides instant feedback and builds a database for the DBE to assess levels of competency quickly and effectively.

"We are excited to be part of such a meaningful project. Ukufunda doesn't only provide free access to great educational content, but is rather a holistic approach to learner and teacher wellbeing, focusing on psychosocial support, safety and wellness. It's a giant leap forward in improving lines of communication and linking all stakeholders," comments Herve Ludovic de Lys, Head of Office, UNICEF South Africa.

South Africa has an estimated household mobile phone penetration rate of 228%*, which suggests that most teachers, parents, and a substantial number of learners, are likely to have access to mobile services.

The learner section of Ukufunda currently includes the following services:

- *My Calendar* - Notification on tasks and events
- *My Educational Resources* - Links to textbooks and reference material
- *My Safety and Wellness* - Links to counselling and emergency services
- *My Groups* - Virtual communities of practice

The next phase of the virtual school will include a section for *My Homework*, assisting learners to complete homework assignments and *My Mentor*, a year-long mentorship that matches learners with either working professionals or tertiary students.

"As a department, we lack sufficient words to express our heartfelt appreciation for the wonderful contribution Mxit and UNICEF continue to make in improving quality in our schooling. Good schools don't just have excellent teachers; they also have a great supportive environment to offer psychosocial support, career guidance and leadership in order to develop well-rounded individuals. Ukufunda provides all of these services and more," concludes Surty.

*GSMA: Mobile Economy sub-Saharan Africa 2013

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