

Rural digital gap bridged

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DURBAN'S reputation as Africa's smartest city has received a further boost, with the launch of a high-tech Digital Doorway project at Ntshongweni, in the rural west of the municipality, a project that could provide the blueprint for the rollout of cheap, fast internet access for all city residents.

Five Digital Doorway multimedia kiosks have been installed in the area, each comprising four computers clustered together wirelessly to give local people access to programs and services previously available to only well-off, urban dwellers.

"The Digital Doorway is a smart way of bridging the digital divide, bringing science and technology to all our people and opening the doors of learning," said Deputy Mayor Logie Naidoo.

Four of the units have been installed in schools and one has been set up at the community's resource centre, providing thousands of locals with access to Open Office, a free, open source alternative to Microsoft's expensive Office suite.

They will also benefit from educational and scientific programmes, 10 000 books from the Project Gutenberg library, elements of the online Wikipedia encyclopaedia, and other software.

The initiative is a collaborative effort between the Rural Area Based Management (ABM) Programme, the national Department of Science and Technology (DST) and the Meraka Institute.

Minister of Science and Technology, Mosibudi Mangena said the initiative would bridge the digital divide affecting communities, especially in rural areas.

"The sad reality is that as South Africa makes advances in this field, many of our young learners have never touched a computer. The situation is even bleaker when it comes to our older citizens. South Africa has the biggest economy in Africa,

yet most of our children are growing up in a computer-illiterate environment.

"Computer skills are a prerequisite in all professions and are becoming increasingly important for the many unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. Computer skills are essential to basic survival in the world," said Mangena.

Grateful

Ward Councillor Fanie Moyo said the project would change the lives of the community. "We are grateful to all involved in the project, for giving us this gift of learning. This initiative will provide our children, and more especially the youth,

with an opportunity to be in line with the changing world of technology," said Moyo.

Local children were excited by the project.

"This is a great opportunity for us as young people coming from an area which was previously disadvantage, now it easy to do our schoolwork any time of the day," said 14-year-old Zama Gumede, of Albin Girls High.

Naidoo said the project demonstrated the city commitment to connecting its citizens to the web.

Free wireless internet access is already available in all 85 libraries, thanks to eThekweni being the first municipality in South Africa to roll out a fibre optic

network that links all its offices.

Members can use the computers in the libraries, or bring their own, wireless enabled laptops. Membership of the city's libraries is free and the membership number is used as the user name password to enable connectivity.

The Digital Doorway project was first successfully piloted in the rural area of Cwili, in the Eastern Cape, five years ago. After the success of the initial project the DST supported the deployment of additional units in different parts of the country with the focus being put on rural and township areas.

