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Local firm may teach maths to the world

A TINY Northern Ireland technology company which has developed a unique online system for teaching maths is today on the verge of going global.

Interest in Queen's University spin-out company Alta Systems' Maths for Schools teaching method has blossomed in the months since it was licensed to Ulster schools.

It has already been adopted by around a quarter of all schools in Northern Ireland since being made available in September.

Now the company is turning its attention to teaching literacy using the system. "The assessment engine doesn't know what subject it is dealing with so it could easily do literacy", said director Barry Hagan.

An the days of the expensive maths tutor could also be numbered – the company has come up with a web-based companion product, Keys For Maths, that can be used from home by anyone with broadband for just £25 a year – about the price of one hour with a tutor. The company is even doing a discount deal – three school years for the price of two.

Since launching the maths teaching system in England and Wales in January, a number of schools have signed contracts. It is being trialed by six Scottish education authorities and last week the Western Isles signed a four-year contract.

Dr Hagan said he was also in discussions with education authorities in Singapore, Spain and Finland. The system was developed in conjunction with Northern Ireland exams body CCEA to meet the needs of 5 to 14-year-olds locally and had been adapted to meet the needs of curricula elsewhere.

Dr Hagan said: "This system builds a profile of the strengths and weaknesses of the pupil and demonstrably improves performance in mathematics and numeracy.

"It was developed with CCEA with the express purpose of replacing Key Stage 1, Keys Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 tests, there is a move to get away from high stakes summer exams.

"This gives total detail on each pupil and allows the teacher to intervene throughout the year."

The system was independently assessed 14 times during four years as it went through development.

Dr. Hagan hopes to have the literacy system ready for sale by the end of the year.

"There is a big education show every year in London in January – that's where we launched the product for England and Wales this year and we would like to launch the literacy package then," he said.