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MIT to help set up science university

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DURING Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visit to Silicon Valley in the US, he would probably have met more graduates from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) than anywhere else, since many of them now run companies there.

MIT, synonymous with research and development (R and D), is assisting in the establishment of the Malaysia University of Science and Technology (MUST).

To be sited within the 240ha Technology Park in Ulu Bernam, Selangor, MUST will be modelled along MIT lines, the 132 year-old icon of R and D.

Despite the strong influence of MIT, those involved in setting MUST are adamant it will be a Malaysian university and relevant to the needs of the country.

"MUST will be a Malaysian university, it is not a group of MIT faculty putting a shingle up that says MUST and teaching here," said Mr Robert A. Brown, dean of engineering at MIT.

Brown was in Kuala Lumpur recently for the signing of an agreement between the MUST-Ehsan Foundation and MIT for setting up the university.

"We see the development of MUST as a tremendous starting point in terms of interaction between MIT and Malaysia in building a world class research university in Malaysia," said Brown.

With this aim, the quality of MUST students is a critical component.

"What happens when you have an institution with very high quality people is you start having very high quality ideas," said Brown.

MIT will advise and show MUST how to develop infrastructure in terms of student admission and selection, using exactly the same criteria as MIT's, but taking into consideration Malaysia's cultural and political issues.

As MIT's director for technology and development programmes, Mr Fred Moavenzadeh puts it, the primary purpose is to develop a Malaysian university that is of the same standard as MIT, rather than MIT just establishing an office here.

"We are not consultants, we have institutional commitments, which is to work with the faculty and students of MUST to develop a research-based style of education, guaranteeing high quality students."

If MUST is to be in the same league as MIT, it will have to develop the same tight relationship with industry and Government, and have an impact on them, just as MIT learnt to do at the turn of the century.

It is envisaged that Malaysian or even foreign companies will approach MUST and ask it to solve their problems or develop solutions for them, supplying the financial research infrastructure as well as the intellectual drive for relevance.

"Many of the industries here have realised that in order to remain competitive internationally, they have to have strong research and development," said Moavenzadeh.

At least 4,000 companies have been formed by either the MIT faculty or graduates: many had their origins as research projects or technology developed at MIT.

Today, one of the most active areas at MIT is software development, which is crucial to Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor plans.

"There are many, many examples but they start with research that is collaborative between industry, Government and the university."

According to Moavenzadeh, many Malaysian companies that will be setting

up their own training institutions have said they are interested in providing students for MUST, as well as eventually funding research.

Some industries may want to send their students to MUST for only 12 months, so the university will have to package its programmes in such a way. However, all the programmes will be relevant to Malaysia's needs and in disciplines in which the nation has strategic interests.

MUST aims to begin the first post-graduate class for a masters in engineering, as soon as possible, perhaps by September this year.

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