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Moving towards distance learning

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WITH efforts leading up to the Multimedia Super Corridor project starting to pick up, it is interesting to note some of the ventures being undertaken to exploit the expected commercial potential.

As with Tongkah Holdings Bhd and its telemedicine venture, Time Telecommunications Sdn Bhd has forged an alliance for a distance learning programme.

The tie-up by Time Multi Media Sdn Bhd is with the Open University of the United Kingdom, considered to be the most established open and distance learning institution in the world today.

Time Multi Media is owned by Electronic Data Interchange (M) Sdn Bhd and Time Telecom.

With this partnership agreement, Time Multi Media is to offer technology-based distance learning programmes in Malaysia by 1998.

Self-study learning materials will be delivered directly to students via a variety of multimedia applications, to enable students to study at their own time and pace.

The results of on-going market research to determine the type and range of courses to be made available, is expected to be completed by December.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who witnessed the signing ceremony, said distance learning will in future become significant, as full-time and part-time study is bouyed by individual desire to pursue a lifetime of education.

Dr Mahathir said there was a need for 40 per cent of the population to have access to tertiary education as against the present 13.9 per cent, if Malaysia was to achieve fully-developed status.

Therefore, the country has to increasingly resort to distance learning.

He said this was because the number of teachers or trainers would increase at a slower rate compared with students, and that the numbers and level required in a fast-emerging knowledge-based society could not be delivered through conventional learning modes.

Signifying the importance of distance learning, there has been special mention of it in the Budget since 1995.

The Seventh Malaysia Plan put its promotion at a more crucial level.

With greater emphasis, those in the university-going age of between 19 and 24 who otherwise will not be going to universities, and those already working, will be able to get a tertiary-level education through distance learning courses.

"There will also be short courses to upgrade the knowledge and skills of the workforce, including those at the managerial and supervisory levels.

"The programmes will be better structured, more organised and carried out on a larger scale through closer co-operation between the institutions of higher learning and the commercial sector.

"New areas of study, particularly in science, technology and management, will be introduced," Dr Mahathir said.

The serious efforts towards this end reflect the current trends world-wide, characterised by distance learning programmes which are gaining momentum.

The years leading to the next millennium promises to be the most challenging period for the application of new and innovative technologies and methods of teaching so as to make the whole world a challenging period for true knowledge societies, Dr Mahathir said.

With the emerging knowledge-based society, he stressed that the methods of teaching must also be changed besides making tertiary education available to more people.

Dr Mahathir said distance learning would require ways of making "understanding" even more easily comprehensible for those less capable of reasoning and logical thinking.

On the MSC, he expressed hope that all local institutions of higher learning will be linked to a host university located within the MSC.

He also called for the host university to act as the administrative centre serving other institutions as participative members.

Based on the business plans submitted by 131 companies, Dr Mahathir said the MSC alone would need 7,000 specially trained workers in its first year of operations.

This will increase to 12,000 in its fifth year.

And to tie in with this long-term view, the four-day 11th annual Asian Association of Open Universities Conference and Exhibition was held at the Putra World Trade Centre recently.

It attracted 120 delegates from 19 countries and marked the first time the AAOU conference and exhibition, themed Quality Assurance in Distance and Open Learning - hosted by Institut Teknologi Mara - was held in Malaysia.

Among the participating scholars were Datuk Professor Dr G. Dhanarajan, president of the Canada-based Commonwealth of Learning; Professor James Taylor from the University of Southern Queensland in Australia and Professor Martin Siegel from Indiana University in the United States.

The exhibition generated widespread public interest through first-hand demonstrations of the latest developments and innovations in teaching and learning methods.

The exhibition showcased the latest developments in distance education, instructional materials, development and production, educational hardware and software, multimedia systems and technology, telemedicine and telelearning.

Issues discussed included the globalisation, quality and competitiveness in distance and open learning, developing distance and open learning using the MSC, and using electronic communication networks to support distance education students and tutors.

Also, Dr Dhanarajan, was named the first AAOU Meritorious Award winner.

The inaugural award was presented by Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak at the close of the AAOU conference and exhibition.

Malaysian-born Dr Dhanarajan, 58, was also the former director of Universiti Sains Malaysia's Centre for Distance Education, and is widely recognised as an active advocate of open learning and distance education.

"Distance learning is no longer a sidestream activity. Providing education to a few is easy.

"Providing it to many is not, and traditional methods alone will not be able to accomplish that.

"People have gotten used to the usual educational methods, but there is a tyranny in the classroom when the transfer of knowledge between teacher and student is kept in the secrecy of the four walls." Dr Dhanarajan said.

He said distance and open learning, especially now when information technology could take these methods to new heights, should increasingly become "a central pillar in the delivery of education."

Dr Dhanarajan, who now resides in Vancouver, Canada, joined the Open Learning Institute in Hong Kong in 1989 as associate director (academic) and served as director from 1991 to 1995.

He was the AAOU secretary-general until 1995 and the educational advisor to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

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