

27/10/1997

UPM gears up to play vital role in MSC

Sheila Stanley

ON April 4, when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad changed the name of Universiti Pertanian Malaysia to Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), he also launched a technology incubation centre, an earth satellite and UPMNet.

This was one of the first publicly recorded events which signalled the important role that UPM would play in the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). Says UPM vice chancellor Professor Datuk Syed Jalalludin Syed Salim: "UPM has all the resources and technology to be able to transform the MSC into a reality."

He notes that the MSC, in essence, encapsulates the concept of transforming the Malaysian manufacturing-based economy to a knowledge-based one.

"The knowledge industry is the industry of the future. And the only way Malaysia can continue growing economically is by having its own knowledge industry," he says.

UPM's foray into the Information Age, however, began even before its name was changed this year. According to Syed, three years ago UPM decided that it had to be more Information Technology (IT) driven because a strong IT platform was seen as necessary to manage an education service and deliver education more effectively.

With the future in mind, instead of opting for a PC-based IT system, UPM decided on a UNIX-based one.

"The UNIX system is a very powerful tool, capable of multi-tasking. Certainly it has more potential than a PC-based system," says Syed Jalalludin.

Today, every UPM staff has a SUN workstation.

UPM was also one of the first institutions in Malaysia to install ATM switches. The four on campus were installed in 1995 and UPM's campus is now working on a Local Area Network (LAN).

But work has not stopped there. More is to come. UPM is planning to install cables to hostels so that students can have free access to the Internet.

Earlier this year, the university launched a "One student, one computer" campaign, whereby each student is encouraged to purchase a computer.

"This way, we can build an IT-literate society," explains Syed Jalalludin. "It is not necessary for students to have a computer or IT-related degree. What's important is that they are IT literate. This is the workforce of the future."

He foresees that UPM students will be one of the main pools for workers within the MSC. Towards this end, UPM allows students from all faculties to do computer elective programmes.

Besides nurturing its student population, UPM is also working on research and development to create content for the MSC.

Two technology centres have been created. In addition to the UPM-Malaysian Technology Development Corporation's Technology Incubator One launched by the Prime Minister, the first phase of Cyber Port should be ready by next year.

These centres house "incubation companies" which are newly-formed companies set up to provide the impetus for the MSC.

"We hope to create a mini-Silicon Valley around UPM, similar to other universities working with industry, like Cambridge University," says Syed

Jalalludin.

The university also has a Cyber Creative Lab which provides courses in multimedia skills, which are open to the public. In addition, the lab also develops multimedia content.

UPM's efforts have not gone unnoticed. At the beginning of the year, UPM was selected to be part of the High Performance Computing Consortium, which comprises 15 universities from around the world.

There are only two from Asia; the other member is from Tokyo. Members of the HPCC are given a SUN Supercomputer by SUN Microsystems.

"The SUN Supercomputer is a very powerful tool and can be used to support MSC applications and solutions for the region," says Syed Jalalludin.

Most importantly, UPM recognises the importance of close collaboration between industry and academic institutions. As Syed Jalalludin notes, universities are centres for innovation but may not have the business skills to market their ideas.

"With collaboration, there is an accelerated flow of ideas from the laboratories to the industry."

As state-of-the-art telecommunications infrastructure is already available in UPM, it has not been difficult for the university to find partners. One of them is Time Telecommunications Sdn Bhd, which has based its RM3 million earth satellite station there.

"The university is setting aside 200 of its 3,000 hectares for IT and research and development centres," says Syed Jalalludin.

Another of its projects is EnterpriseNet, for which UPM has already developed the concept and configuration. With its headquarters on campus, EnterpriseNet is expected to be a nationwide intranet providing a secure platform for the delivery of digital information and services for Malaysians.

"It was developed because we foresaw congestion on the Internet once the MSC was fully operational," says Syed Jalalludin, adding that UPM wants IT industry members to come forward and work with it on this.

(END)