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Optimising Cambridge's resources

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CAMBRIDGE 2020, the initiative that will bring together the divergent resources of the university town to create a region with the economic power of US' Silicon Valley, was sparked off by Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor.

Dr David Cleevely, managing director of Analysys Ltd, a Cambridge-based telecommunications consultancy, told Business Times in an interview that the Malaysian visit to the UK last year to promote the MSC engendered a realisation in Cambridge that it would have to come up with an overall plan to put to the best use all its resources, or risk being left behind.

He said in May last year, Analysys, which has an office in the MSC, organised a visit to Cambridge for about 60 members of the Malaysian delegation promoting the MSC.

After the visit, some Cambridge companies, financiers and members of the faculty got together at a dinner hosted by the university to promote links between the university and local industry.

Most of those who were at this dinner had either attended Dr Mahathir's presentation on the MSC at the Imperial College or met with the members of the Malaysian delegation. So, the conversation at most tables revolved around the MSC.

After the dinner, Cleevely said, speaker after speaker stood up and talked about what the Malaysian delegates had said, pointing out that this was clearly the way forward and it would have to be taken seriously.

They realised that while Cambridge, one of the oldest universities in the world, and the "heartland for telecommunications" was sitting on considerable resources, it lacked a cohesive plan to bring all these resources together.

"Each little enterprise is pursuing its own line without reference to the others and if countries like Malaysia is coming up with initiatives like the MSC, there is a chance that, despite its resources, Cambridge will get left behind," Cleevely pointed out.

He added that during the dinner he (Cleevely), Cambridge University vice-chancellor Sir Alec Broers, Hermann Hauser who founded Acorn as well as 20 other companies and runs Microsoft's venture capital company, Amadeus, in Cambridge and Louis McCagg who is involved in Cambridge Futures, were sitting at the same table discussing what needed to be done to meet this challenge.

"This got confirmed by over a third of the entire dinner who stood up and said something about Malaysia," he said.

Cleevely said there were two main areas for Cambridge to get right - marketing and an internal policy to encourage cohesion between the companies.

"Everybody is talking about what a fantastic job the Malaysians are doing marketing the MSC.

"Marketing Cambridge is crucial because people do not understand what is going on here.

"This is the heartland of telecommunications. You would be astonished at how much the world has changed because of things that have come out of Cambridge," he said.

Among its many achievements are the development of the first optic fibre cable, most of research for the PCN and GSM handsets, the first data network and the first digital computer.

He added that the idea of digital communications was also first propounded in Cambridge and the first packet switch network in the world was developed and constructed here.

Hauser, Broers and Cleevely had breakfast some four weeks later and invited Professor Marcial Echenique of ME & Partners Urban Planning to discuss the matter further and they began to get a clearer idea of what needed to be done.

Later, Cleevely called up Alcatel's marketing director Peter Radley who agreed to sponsor a report looking at how to optimise the communications and information technology in Cambridge. Analysys came up with the report entitled Cambridge 2020.

"We're looking at a 20-25 year time scale. 2020 is a great number and the Malaysians used it first. We `filched' it because we don't see why we shouldn't borrow some ideas.

"Dr Mahathir started the whole process and if it hadn't been for him coming here, this would never have happened," he said.

"This" would essentially be a comprehensive plan for the creation of a region similar in economic power to the Silicon Valley. "Before, we never had a coherent policy to put in the kind of physical, economic and social infrastructure you would need to achieve this."

At the moment, he said, though Cambridge hosts the highest concentration of high-tech activity in Europe, it is small compared to global rivals, notably the Silicon Valley.

Giving some comparative figures, he said, Silicon Valley has a population of 2.3 million, employs 1.2 million in its high-tech industries, its exports are worth some STG25 billion (STG1 = RM6.41) a year and it had 3,575 new start-ups in the 1994/1995 period. The average per annum wage in Silicon Valley is STG30,000.

Cambridgeshire, on the other hand, has a population of 694,000, employs 35,000 in its high-tech industries, its exports are worth some STG744 million a year and it had 87 new business start-ups in the same period. The average wage there is STG19,000 per annum.

Cleevely added that the development fits in with the splitting up of the UK into a series of economic regions. Cambridge happens to be at the geographical centre of the Eastern region.

"If we take into account the whole Eastern region, instead of having a city of 100,000 people, we would have a region of 6 million people and can draw on a lot more resources and a lot of space.

"Encompassed in the region are the British Telecom (BT) research laboratories in Harlow, Northern Telecom's (Nortel) laboratories where all the early work on optical fibre cable transmission was done, also in Harlow.

Cleevely said at the moment, the priority for getting Cambridge 2020 off the ground, is to get the information planning guidelines of the region approved within the next 12 months.

Then over the next three to four years, it will need to implement the critical elements of infrastructure including housing, transport, communications and social infrastructure linking matters such as local government, health, medicine and learning.

"After that, it has to be self-sustaining because it is going to have to be obvious that growth is being generated to justify further investment," he pointed out.

Analysys will be organising a seminar on regulating multimedia and telecommunications at the Legend Hotel on June 23.

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