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The IT imperative

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THE government has committed millions of ringgit to bring about a massive transformation in the education system which will see information technology (IT) taking centre stage. Changes in the methodology of teaching, involving the wide use of IT tools in the teaching-learning process, are expected to create a vast pool of analytical and creative students.

Implementation will begin in the 90 Smart (high-tech) Schools in the country, and eventually in all 9,000 schools in the country. The government is confident that its objective of turning all schools into Smart Schools will be achieved in three years, despite the economic downturn having slowed down the implementation process and the development of courseware by the appointed consortium.

Once fully implemented, Malaysia will be closer to realising its aim of being a centre for world-class education.

Many institutions of higher learning, public and private, have jumped on the IT bandwagon and are extensively using IT and multimedia tools to impart knowledge to their students.

Courses unheard of in earlier generations have been introduced into the curriculum. 'Live' video-conferencing between lecturers and students via the Internet, for instance, has given a new lease of life to distance learning, a mode of education that is fast gaining popularity. Multimedia tools made available to students are helping them communicate with their counterparts abroad, thereby allowing them to expand their horizons from within the classroom.

But all efforts to enhance students' command of IT will not bear fruit if the long-standing phobia students have had for science and mathematics is not resolved. This fear of anything involving computers is also prevalent among many in the older generation, and their children may not get an early introduction to the world of computers. This is something the government is addressing.

Also, students taking up arts subjects still outnumber those opting for science courses, a situation that could hamper the government's quest for 'developed nation' status. The government is working to ensure that a 60:40 ratio of science:arts students is achieved and maintained.

The steps executed by the Ministry of Education, especially at school-level, appear to have achieved some measure of success. There has been an incremental increase in the number of upper secondary school students who have chosen science subjects, correlating with an increase in the enrolment of students in science courses at tertiary level.

Matriculation courses, introduced three decades ago to help widen the pool of bumiputera science students, have also succeeded in fulfilling their objective. From a mere 4,000 students for the 1993/94 academic session, the intake for this year has snowballed to 40,000.

The government has pointed out to students, time and again, that pursuing IT-related courses is a guaranteed meal-ticket as job opportunities abound in this field. Mega-projects like the Multimedia Super Corridor alone needs a vast number of knowledge workers adept in the intricacies and workings of IT. And as Malaysia moves into the information age, almost every aspect of life will involve IT.

The recent statement made by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad clearly explains the need to achieve a certain degree of mastery

in IT. He said it was imperative that certain courses in universities be replaced in view of the world's rapid changes in the era of IT as otherwise Malaysia would be left behind.

Public universities have introduced many IT-related courses and are geared to have more. Private higher educational institutions too are not far behind with their world-class, state-of-the-art facilities.

Among private colleges offering IT subjects are HELP-Charles Sturt University, British-Malaysia Institute, Kolej Damansara Utama, Sepang Institute of Technology, Asia Pacific Institute and the School of Audio Engineering.

With the government's confident backing, it will only be a matter of time before the country's seemingly lofty ambitions are translated into reality.

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