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`Reinvent varsities to meet changing demands'

CYBERJAYA, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said there was a need to reinvent universities to meet the changing demands of the emerging digital society.

He said as new technologies brought about new demands from the workplace, more adults from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, were seeking education and skills necessary for their careers.

Speaking at the launching of the RM350 million Multimedia University (MMU) here, he said emerging information and communications technologies had removed the constraints of space and time.

"The current style of education in which degree programmes are completed long before the knowledge is needed has shifted to "just-in-time" education, and eventually to "just-for-you" educational programmes tailored to meet specific lifelong learning requirements," he said.

With powerful computers and high-speed networks, educational services could be delivered to anyone at any place and time. The services, he said, were no longer confined to campus or academic schedules.

Dr Mahathir said the change was also necessary as new information and communications technologies had enabled the transition from student to learner, from faculty-centred to learner-centred and from student to a lifelong member of a learning community.

"The trends I referred to will provide substantial spin-offs to the economy if we are geared to take advantage of the opportunities," he said, adding that in the United States alone, higher learning was a US\$175 billion (RM665 billion) a year enterprise.

"As society becomes more dependent upon knowledge workers, the global knowledge business would become one of the most active growth industries of our times," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysian institutions of higher learning must exploit the growing market.

"Competition is increased, as virtual education providers make their entrance into this market to compete with traditional institutions," he said.

He said Malaysia's continued emphasis on education was also based on the belief that the greatest long-term challenges to its competitiveness might not be in the current financial regulations or exchange rate management.

"It may lie in our ability to develop special software such as quality of education and enhancement of science and technology.

"We need to harness the full power of technology and intellectual capital to have sustained growth," he said, adding that to achieve this, there must be a radical change in the country's educational outlook.

He said the process had been started at the grassroots level with the Smart Schools Multimedia Super Corridor flagships application.

This, he said, must now be extended upwards into tertiary education with the MMU as "the vanguard of our initiative."

Dr Mahathir said to become a learning society, Malaysians must make an effort to eliminate cultural and societal barriers that had served as stumbling blocks for innovative thinking and pursuits.

He said only then they would be able to develop the intellectual capital and achieve the competitive edge needed to compete in the next millennium.

"Although we do not expect an overnight transformation of our society, we must expedite this process of change.

"As our society develops and evolves, mindsets will change to become more open and conducive to innovation," he said.

On MMU, Dr Mahathir said its mission would extend beyond the mere provision of specialised IT and multi media courses.

It is designed to venture beyond the concept of traditional institutions of higher learning to meet the changes of the new digital age.

"A key indicator will be its ability to become truly world-class in order to attract and produce the best in terms of faculties and students," he said, adding that the "best and brightest" would form synergistic networks with the industry and students.

He said the MMU was not an ordinary university as it would become the cultural heart and intellectual nerve centre of the learning society to be created within the Cyberjaya community.

He said the investment in the MMU was necessary both due to the need to catalyse changes in the educational system and to create economic benefits.

Dr Mahathir said being at the heart of the MSC, the MMU could also leverage its position by forging meaningful linkages with industries, especially leading multinationals and web-shapers with cutting-edge technologies.

He said he was glad to note that the MMU was already involved in collaborative efforts with more than 60 companies.

Dr Mahathir added that the opening of the MMU signified the readiness and capability of the MSC to generate a critical mass of quality knowledge workers for MSC status companies.

"It will also be the nerve centre of the Cyberjaya intelligent city, networking academia, enterprise and the community," he said, adding that the university was envisioned as a centre of knowledge creation and dissemination not only for the MSC but for the entire region.

He said the MMU which embraced a liberal philosophy of learning transcending language and cultural barriers, would one day become a leading centre for knowledge for the Digital Age.

"Embracing an open philosophy of learning, it will transcend cultural and national barriers. In fact, we would encourage institutions using even foreign languages as medium of instruction to be based in the MMU," he added.

MMU, which was the first private university, was set up as Universiti Telekom in Malacca in November 1996 offering education in the fields of engineering, information technology, creative multimedia and management.

Commencing its operation in June, the MMU is built to conduct a spectrum of information technology and multimedia based courses at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

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