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K-word is the new sound of power

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BUZZWORDS are designed to ring and echo in your ears and be catchy. One of the latest buzzwords around the corridors of power and conferences is the "K-Economy" or a knowledge-based or driven economy.

In fact, the Global Knowledge II (GKII), or the Second Global Knowledge Conference, was recently held in Kuala Lumpur. The first conference was held in Toronto, Canada. Tighten your seatbelts for more of the same. The guiding theme of GKII was on access, empowerment and governance.

President of the World Bank Group Christopher Wolfenson in Washington made an interesting video-conference, envisioning the growing contribution of advanced satellite technology, for example, in bringing ideas and knowledge to the poor of the globe.

Knowledge is power even for the poor.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently announced that a K-Economy Master Plan will be completed by September 2000. Earlier the Minister of Finance Tun Daim Zainuddin in presenting the 2000 Budget stated that the government will be preparing a Master Plan on the K-Economy.

Plans of Actions in Key Strategic Areas will follow the Master Plan and they should be completed within a year. Brainstorming and consultation will be completed within a year and a half.

There is some danger that K-Economy could be a runaway or magnetic idea attracting to it all and sundry, a parenthesis to justify all manner of things if it is not pinned down properly.

There is no shortage of definitions for knowledge or things associated with knowledge. Those with a literary bent will remember the poet E.E. Cumming's somewhat disturbing aphorism that "Knowledge is a polite word for dead but not buried imagination" and the pregnant but whimsical African proverb that: "When an old man dies, a library burns down."

There are different ways of defining and categorising knowledge.

A useful start is to make a distinction between: (a) tacit knowledge and (b) codified knowledge.

Experience is an important channel for accumulating tacit knowledge. Societies can have tacit knowledge that are specific to the community. Codified knowledge is the accumulation and distillation of knowledge.

Some argue that more and more knowledge is becoming codified and, therefore, rising in importance. Tacit or non-codified knowledge is not easily transferable. Embodied in, say the employees of a firm, it can be a source of its competitive advantage.

Incentives and good management can help in employees using and transferring their tacit knowledge instead of hoarding it.

Your grandmother's knowledge on making lemang, for example, is part of the stock of tacit knowledge on making lemang. But as soon as she writes it down in a lemang blueprint, and posts it on her Internet website, [www.lemang.com](http://www.lemang.com), or sells the blueprint to the Hilton chain of hotels, then her tacit lemang knowledge becomes codified knowledge.

There is, currently, no definitive explanation as to what constitutes a K-Economy. Numerous notions of what is a K-Economy are floating.

It will be part of the study, therefore, to clarify the ideas and concepts that seem to be associated with a K-Economy. At the broadest level the concept of a K-Economy seems to be based on the notion that a K-Economy is one where knowledge, however defined, makes an important

contribution to economic growth and development.

A tentative working definition that could be used is the definition given by the UK Department of Trade and Industry in the UK's White Paper on the K-Economy that: "A Knowledge-driven economy is one in which the generation and exploitation of knowledge play the predominant part in the creation of wealth."

Knowledge content of products and services are rising. Knowledge content of products are increasing as shown by the widespread use of personal computers, mobile phones, electronics of information and communications instruments.

Other indicators of rising knowledge content are shown by the growing importance of designing skills and other knowledge-intensive services.

All sorts of inputs and changes will be required if we are to make rapid strides to turn the economy into more of a K-Economy. Major changes will have to be made to the education system.

The use of information technology must become more widespread. And social and cultural hindrances to searching, accumulating and dissemination information, ideas and knowledge will have to be jettisoned quickly.

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