

# Dr M: More software writers needed

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KUALA LUMPUR: With software playing a crucial role in distance learning, universities must work towards developing a bigger pool of software writers and engineers with the necessary skills.

Effective distance learning with the use of educational software can help make tertiary education more and more accessible to everyone, especially mature students who want to learn on a part-time basis, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

Referring to the current use of books and journals as teaching materials, he said computer educational software would do the job more effectively.

"It is imperative that universities contribute to the teaching and development of software programming skills. There is no doubt that the country with the greatest number of software writers and engineers will see a better dissemination of knowledge," Dr Mahathir said at the opening ceremony of Open University Malaysia's (OUM) new campus here yesterday.

"Clearly there is a big role

for off-campus distant learning institutions. It will probably become bigger than on-campus university education," he added.

However, the Prime Minister warned unscrupulous providers against offering inferior courses or selling fake qualifications. Hence, the National Accreditation Board or LAN would continue to monitor the quality of private higher education. It would also have to deter-

mine a minimum standard for distance learning institutions to ensure that the courses they offered would meet the basic requirements set, said Dr Mahathir.

"The Government cannot and will not allow private educational institutions to be absolutely free of government supervision. It may be necessary at a later stage to charge for the certificates accorded to genuine institutions," he added.

In keeping with Malaysia's aspirations to be the regional centre of excellence for education, Dr Mahathir said not only should the country attract more foreign students, it should reduce the number of Malaysians going abroad to study.

"Merely by reducing the number of students going abroad, we can already reduce the outflow of foreign exchange and bolster our reserves.

"The Government is encouraging the education industry not merely to provide education at the highest level for Malaysians but also to contribute to the nation's economic well-being," he said.

The Prime Minister also

commended OUM on being a "unique" entity - a multimedia consortium wholly owned by 11 public universities in the country - offering programmes and software developed by the partner universities.

Conceptualised with the birth of Multimedia Technology Enhancement Operations (Meteor) Sdn Bhd in 1998 to provide life-long learning opportunities for self-development at tertiary and skills development level, OUM now has over 7,000 students enrolled in its programmes since it was inception in 2000.

The virtual university offers distance learning in 15 different study programmes including Bachelor in Information Technology, Bachelor in Education and Bachelor in Multimedia Communications (Honours).

A blend of different learning approaches and pedagogical styles are used in the courses, from online materials, multimedia materials such as audio and CD ROM, and video conferencing, as well as printed materials, tutorials and consultation at the learning centres nationwide.