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# Malaysian universities and colleges are bracing for the next wave of change in the evolving ICT.

By Edwin Yapp

**I**nformation and communications technology (ICT) is rapidly evolving and constantly changing. Research firm IDC predicts that IT spending will grow in the range of 10% to 12% this year after enjoying about a 12% growth last year. It further notes that the double-digit growth will be contributed by the changing demand in IT services.

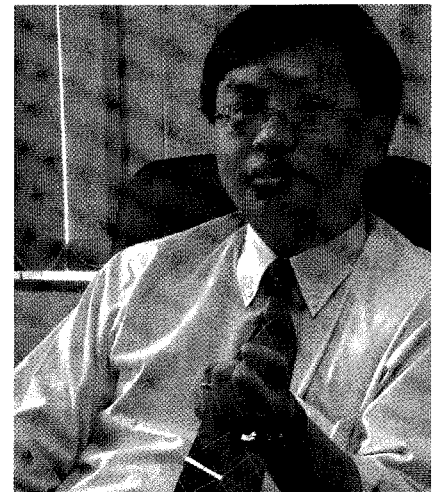
Much has been said and written about the impact of ICT in the context of the business world but very little has been said in the context of the academic world, especially vis-à-vis the local education scene.

For instance, what are the challenges faced by institutions of higher learning as ICT continues to grow at an exponential rate, and how do they prepare for these challenges? What of the financial challenges with regard to the escalating ICT hardware and software costs?

While acknowledging the rapid changes in ICT, universities and colleges in Malaysia are generally bracing for the next wave of these changes by approaching the issues fairly conservatively.

One such institution of higher learning is Taylor's University College, based in Subang Jaya, Selangor.

Taylor's College Chief Information Officer Michael Ngeow says the college's spending on ICT systems amounts to about 2% to 4% of its annual revenue, a figure he considers to be quite



progressive yet not overly aggressive.

'We are a private institution fully funded through the revenue generated from the programmes, unlike public universities, which receive budget allocations from the government.

'Thus, it's a challenge for us to keep up with the advancement in ICT and, as such, we have to be prudent in how we manage our resources to meet this challenge,' he says.

Taylor's University College has about 9,000 students and a staff of 1,000 in various capacities.

In public universities, the trend is not dissimilar, notwithstanding the fact that they receive funds from the government for operational and expansion purposes.

For example, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), which has its headquarters

in Shah Alam, Selangor, utilises about 1% of its total allocation from the government to meet its ICT needs.

Dr Mat Ikram Yusof, director of ICT at UiTM, says: 'Although we're a public university and our funds come from the government, we are a very large university with over 110,000 students in 26 campuses nationwide. Our ICT needs are huge and we need to prioritise our needs in order that we may address them effectively.'

### Prioritisation the Key

UiTM's computing systems cater to four main core areas, namely, library and information services, student services, staff services, and administration.

Dr Ikram says the goal of his division is to deliver an up-to-date and reliable ICT infrastructure to all its 13 branch campuses located in every state in Malaysia so that all its students can benefit from equitable access to the UiTM information system.

'Being a very large public university brings with it varied challenges. On one hand, we have to keep up with new technologies, such as equipping our campuses with wireless connectivity, because our campuses are so sparse and students need basic Internet connection. On the other hand, UiTM has to optimise its budget and prioritise its projects accordingly so that it does not spend unnecessarily.'

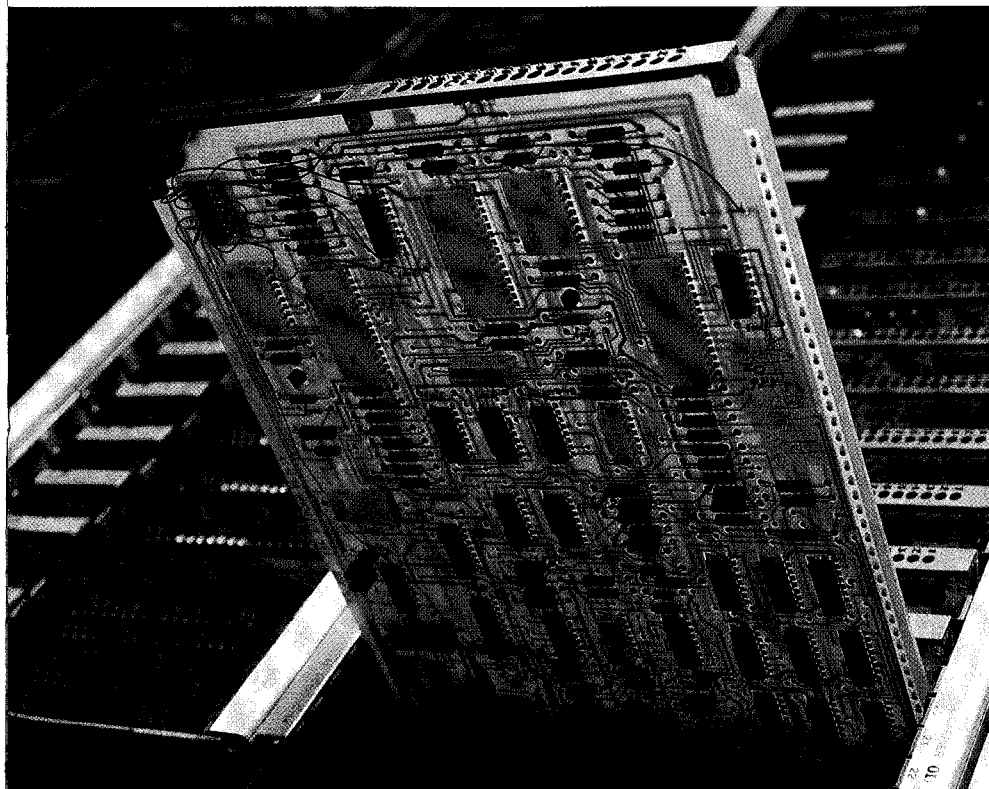
'Another major challenge for us is that we have many legacy computing systems which need to be integrated and a fair bit of our budget has to be used to ensure that the new systems we introduce will work with the old,' he says.

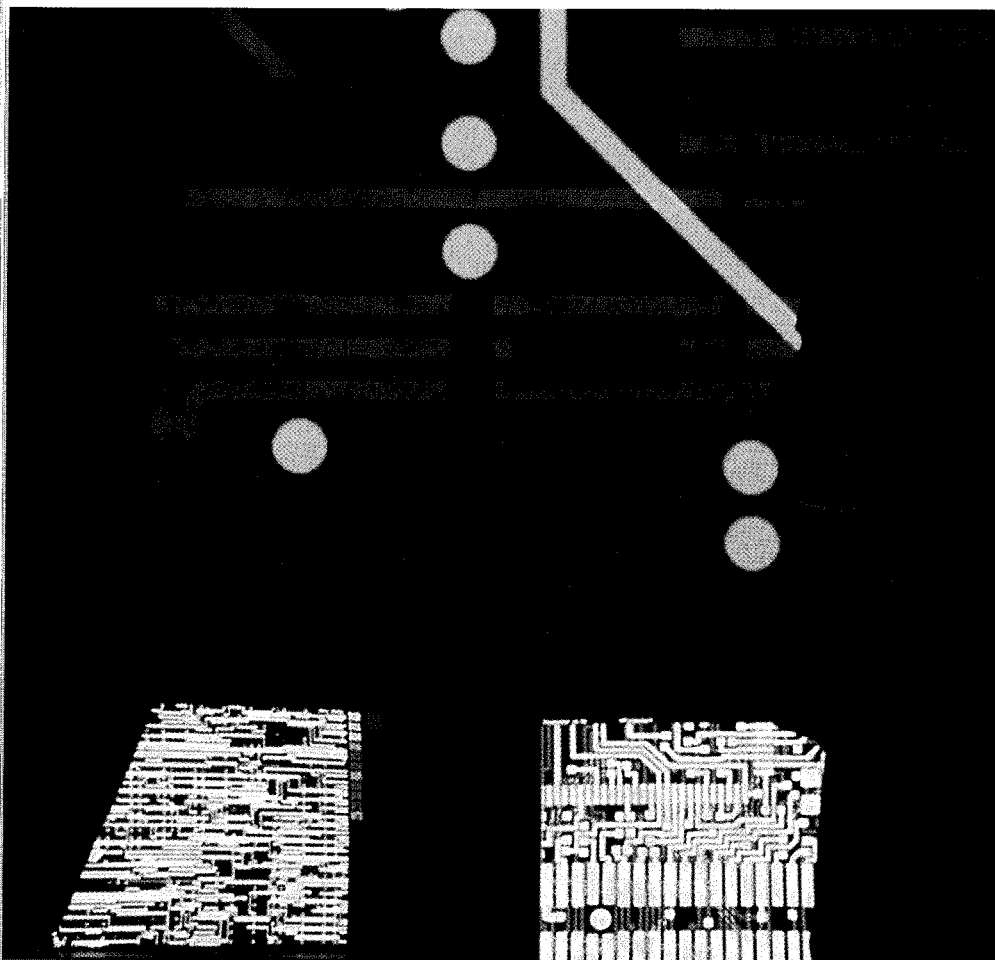
To help UiTM look into these varied needs, Dr Ikram says, UiTM has a strategic planning division which takes care of keeping up with the technology while prioritising what needs to be looked into first.

Taylor's Ngeow says computing systems at his institution are also divided into four similar categories: teaching and learning, research, administration, and finance/human resource/support services.

To address the balance between the use of ICT and budgetary constraints, Taylor's has a governance structure in place to guide it when considering the kinds of ICT technologies it wants to invest in.

'Our guiding principle is to evaluate what our needs are and to ascertain if the developments in ICT fit into our overall plan to enhance our university's value





proposition to our customers,' he says.

Ngeow says the evaluation process involves ideas which originate from the faculty involved in the teaching and learning sector. These ideas are collated and presented to its steering committee. Upon approval, pilot trials will then be run and, if all goes well, a plan will be put in place to implement new technologies.

'We also participate in various fact-finding trips locally and abroad to keep in touch with what's available out there and we'll pick the best model to implement based on our requirements,' he says.

### **Saving Costs**

Another challenge which both universities face is the rising cost of software, something which Ngeow believes there is no direct way of getting

around it.

'Initially, we have to 'bite the bullet' and incur the cost of equipping our systems with the required software,' he says.

However, he adds that software vendors do provide educational establishments discounted rates to help them manage their budgets.

'We have to negotiate a win-win situation and develop smart partnerships with these vendors. For example, we get to equip Taylor's with Oracle software at a lower cost because we're working with them to impart its technology to our students,' he says.

Dr Ikram concurs and adds that even as a large public institution funded by the government, UiTM is not spared the rising cost of software. In fact, he says

that being large means it needs to look into more software requirements, which directly impacts its budget.

'One way we've managed to address this is to form alliances with other public universities so that we can collectively negotiate with software vendors for discounted prices on their products,' he says.

On the use of open source software (OSS), both Ngeow and Dr Ikram concur that there are concerns if they were to be used in mission critical systems.

'Our worry is whether we can obtain the competent technical support, if we were to use OSS,' says Ngeow.

Adds Dr Ikram: 'There are many versions of OSS software out there. For example, Linux comes in many versions and the issue for us is whether we can get the right support for the different versions. Also, most of our users are not IT savvy and would just want PCs which are simple to use. This may be a challenge if we were to use OSS.'

### **A Wish List**

In the coming year, Ngeow says, his plans include equipping academic staff with the right kind of tools to improve Taylor's University College's teaching and learning experience.

'My vision is to explore IT in a pedagogical context and to change the current perception that ICT is merely being used as a utility. For instance, improving our IT systems so that we can quickly enrol new students should not be the end in itself.

'Instead, we must look at ways to improve the teaching and learning experience by exploring how IT can be used to help lecturers develop more attention-grabbing courseware and assist them to use ICT to enhance the learning process,' he says.

Ngeow also hopes to employ more good ICT personnel as they are hard to come by. 'This is one of the major challenges I'm faced with; to get as much done with the most competent people in the most cost-effective way possible,' he says. **mb**