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(Prime Minister)

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of Open Universities

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1. It is indeed an honour for me to address this distinguished gathering at the opening ceremony of the 11th Annual Conference and Exhibition of the Asian Association of Open Universities.

2. Let me begin by defining what I understand by distance learning. A little over fifty years ago, in the middle of this century, in the context of this country, distance learning was appropriately defined as having to walk five miles or more from home to school. For my generation, for most of us, distance learning meant walking bare-footed to an ill-equipped school. Now, fifty years later, at the turn of the century, distance learning has taken on a whole new meaning. It refers to situations where the learner and the educator are separated by distance, may be even time, using telecommunications and electronic devices to interactively follow the lessons. It allows the learner to study at his own time, place and pace. In essence, distance learning means having the school teaching environment brought to the home or anywhere that the student chooses to be. Physical attendance in lecture rooms is no longer necessary.

3. In Malaysia, education has always been accorded high priority because we have always regarded education as the key to personal and national progress. Ever since independence some 20 percent of the national budget has been allocated to education. Parents endure many sacrifices in order that their children could get the best education possible.

4. In our Vision 2020 we targeted the achievement of a fully developed nation for Malaysia by 2020. To achieve this we need a highly educated and highly trained population. We expect 40 percent of our population to have access to tertiary education compared to 13.9 percent at present. To do this we will have to resort to distance learning more and more. This is because the number of teachers or trainers will increase at a lower rate than students.

5. Accordingly, since 1995 the National Budget has

made special mention about distance learning. The Finance Minister declared that all institutions of higher learning should introduce courses to upgrade the knowledge and skills of working people through distance learning, if they had not already done so.

6. As a matter of fact, distance learning in the modern sense is not new in Malaysia. In 1971 a local university began what was then called off campus courses patterned after the Open University in the United Kingdom. Today almost all institutions of higher learning that are Government funded are offering a variety of courses through their own distance learning programmes. In the private sector correspondence courses on various subjects have always been popular. Now many privately owned tertiary education institutes are also offering many programmes of distance learning in collaboration with overseas universities.

7. The 7th Malaysia Plan spanning the five years between 1996 and 2000 puts distance learning promotion at an even more crucial level. The allocation to the Government universities will enable those who otherwise would not be going to universities but are of university-going age i.e. between 19 and 24, together with those already working to get a university level education through distance learning courses.

8. There will also be short courses aimed at upgrading the knowledge and skills of the workforce including those at the managerial and supervisory levels. The programmes will be better structured, more organised and carried out on a larger scale through closer co-operation between the institutions of higher learning and the commercial sector. New areas of study, particularly in science, technology and management, will be introduced.

9. The serious effort taken by the Malaysian government to expand, strengthen and expedite the distance learning programmes reflect the current world-wide trend. Distance learning programmes the world over are gaining momentum and the years leading to the next millennium promises to be the most challenging period for the application of new and innovative technologies and methods of teaching so as to make the whole world a challenging period for true knowledge societies.

10. In the information society, there is a definite shift in the profile and skills of the workforce. As the economy is increasingly becoming more dependent on information and knowledge, the demand is not just for a better educated workforce, but more importantly a workforce that is continually willing to learn and relearn through life.

11. Conventional teaching which is rigidly time and place-dependent is sufficient for the present limited knowledge-based society. The demand for knowledge-workers is not so big. But in a knowledge-based society which is emerging fast, the old methods of teaching will not be able to produce the number and the levels of education needed by society. And so not only must we make tertiary education available to the greatest number through distance learning but the methods of teaching must also be changed. As much as learning by rote has been displaced by learning through understanding, distance learning would require ways of making understanding even more easily comprehensible for those less capable of reasoning and logical thinking. It is a fact that it is much easier to learn how things work than why things work the way they do. Having learnt how then the why can be more easily understood.

12. The computer has made it possible to demonstrate in very graphic terms the shape of things from every angle including interiors and to turn the object in any direction so as to give a proper perspective of whatever object described through text or orally and to explain the way things work. Simulation has developed to a high degree of accuracy as to make the computer image more real. Virtual reality is really as close to reality as can be. The student is able to interact with the images and to ask questions and get the best answer from the best teacher than if he was in a lecture hall or a laboratory. With these hardware and software, distance learning has become an improvement on direct conventional teaching in classrooms or even laboratories. This distance learning system will make even those who before were not considered qualified to go to universities potential geniuses. Indeed we are already seeing the university rejects or dropouts succeeding in life by learning in unconventional ways.

13. With the advance in telecommunication distance learning knows no distance or time limit. A student may be anywhere in the world and he will not be deprived from education. What is more, the education process is simpler, more comprehensive and more relevant to whatever it is that he is doing or wants to do. The technology enables him to do away with inaccurate note-taking since he can recall on his screen all or any part of the lesson that he wishes to revise. Indeed he can test himself as often as he likes so as to know his own progress and how he would fare in an examination. The only thing really required of him is diligence, a willingness to sit in front of computer screens for a reasonable span of time and to follow the instructions and the explanations given.

14. With distance learning the student can be on the move without losing his ability to study. Through mobile phones and lap-tops, faxes and recordings he will be free from a tight time-table of lectures or demonstrations.

15. In Malaysia, these emerging technologies will be explored and tried out in our Multimedia Super Corridor project. The MSC is a huge test-bed for trying out not just these emerging technologies of the information age and multimedia but also the way of life in the age of instant and unlimited information.

16. For those of you who may be hearing it for the first time, the MSC is physically a 15 km by 50 long corridor that runs from the world's tallest building, the Kuala Lumpur City Centre, in itself an intelligent precinct, to a new electronic Government administrative centre, a new cyber city dedicated to multimedia and on to the region's largest international airport, Kuala Lumpur International Airport, KLIA, scheduled to be operational in 1998.

17. This piece of real estate is almost a green field site for building of state-of-the art cities and systems. Half way between the KLCC and KLIA two cities will house (a) the new administrative capital of Malaysia while the other (b) will be a cyber city where we will locate industries, research and development facilities, a multimedia university and other institutions and operational head quarters for multinational corporations to direct world-wide manufacturing and trading activities using multimedia. Both cities will have state-of-the-art communications facilities with fibre to all offices, business premises and houses.

18. We will initiate the electronic government, media industry clusters, a web to enable companies to operate world-wide without having to do much physical travel, smart schools and the most effective systems of distance learning and telemedicine.

19. The MSC is regarded as a catalyst to push Malaysia's industrialisation to the next level. The development of MSC is part of Malaysia's new strategy and programme to switch to high technology capital-intensive industries with special focus on information and telecommunications-based industries. It is hoped that part of the MSC will become a collaborative cluster of universities and corporate research and development centres, using distance learning techniques to produce world-class graduates.

20. We hope to see a cluster of local institutions of

higher learning coordinating efforts, sharing resources and facilities and taking advantage of the emerging communications technologies to strengthen our distance learning programmes.

21. We hope also to see that all local institutions of higher learning linked to a host university located within the MSC. Let the host university act as the administrative centre serving other institutions as participative members. Through such collaborative effort concentrating on distance learning programmes, the government will effectively create a huge open university without actually building a separate institution. This is tantamount to a cost saving measure on the part of the Government while an extensive distance learning programme is implemented expeditiously.

22. Through this open university concept, the students are likely to be enrolled at a number of institutions of higher learning simultaneously. The open university will provide students with access to local and overseas lectures and advisors who are truly experts in their respective fields. Thus will the best courses be integrated and made available to the largest number of students.

23. The open university concept will be made more effective if all institutions of higher learning allow credit transfer between one another's distance learning courses. The system can be made even more efficient if the distance learning programmes consist of modular curriculum design and partnership can be developed between member institutions. It is even possible for the qualification to be awarded not by a particular institution but named after a particular and prestigious course conducted by a group of institutions. The host university located in the MSC can coordinate the courses and administer the multi-institution programme conducted by the most respected teachers from the best universities of the world.

24. Through this concept, courses offered can be at certificate, diploma, undergraduate and even masters' levels. More importantly, modular courses, in the mode of distance learning, can be tailor-made to suit every industry. This exercise is particularly useful in order to upgrade staff in specific field of expertise. A good example is I.T literacy.

25. Recently, Malaysia launched the National I.T Awareness campaign. We talked about how Malaysians must start now to master information technology if we want to have the number of knowledge workers we need. We stressed the need to be able to use information

technology as a medium to improve our work and the quality of our life. Based on business plans submitted by 131 companies, the MSC alone will need 7,000 specially trained workers in its first year of operations with an increase to 12,000 in its fifth year.

26. The question that begs to be asked is how do we start? We should not be afraid of technology. We should master it and apply it in our work. We must adopt new attitudes and be open to changes brought about by new technology. We must be willing to learn and relearn.

27. I sincerely think distance learning is part of the answer. If the open university concept is accepted and put to practice with a concerted effort, I believe we can achieve the goal we have set for ourselves. We can even achieve the 40 percent target for access to tertiary education for our population by the year 2020 or earlier. We can also achieve all these against the background of strengthening traditional values as stipulated in Vision 2020.

28. I also believe that distance learning programmes offered by the Malaysian open university should be opened to ASEAN or even Asian countries. Since the quality of our education will be of world standard, we should expect students from all over the world. After all in the next century people will no longer be confined to their own countries. They will work anywhere and everywhere. Studying at a university with students from all over the world will prepare them for the global environment they will live and work in.

29. We are also encouraged by the fact that new communication and information technologies offer the opportunity to make distance learning international through the use of interactive compact discs, video conferencing, computer networking backed as appropriate with fax, telephone, electronic mail and printed materials.

30. I would like to invite all member countries of the Asian Association of Open Universities to consider making distance learning cross the national boundaries of the member countries. Indeed I do believe that distance learning concept of the future would be without borders.

31. In the year 2020, I see that institutions of higher learning that offer distance learning programmes will be linked on a national and global scale by telecommunications technologies. In the future, educational systems of distance learning will be globalised by the emerging telecommunication

technologies. Distance learning will be a definite choice apart from full-time and part-time study modes. This will be much encouraged by the desire of every individual for lifetime education.

32. Let me conclude my remarks by wishing you all a very successful conference and declare the 11th Annual Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities officially opened.

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