



Setting up a virtual campus

UNIVERSITY Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) is already a fully networked campus, with interactive videoconferencing facilities, and aims to provide "virtual campus" facilities in the near future, according to Unimas vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Zawawi Ismail.

Managed by the Faculty of Information Technology at Unimas, the virtual campus facility is targeted at learners with family and professional commitments who therefore cannot easily attend a conventional physical campus.

"It incorporates innovative elements of education and technology, enabling students to design study programmes according to their needs, interests and preferred learning styles," says Zaidah Razak, Dean of Unimas' Faculty of Information Technology.

As a pilot project, Unimas and the Kuala Lumpur-based Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology (Apiit) jointly conduct a Masters of Science (MSc) course in Advanced Information Technology (IT) for corporate candidates in the Klang Valley.

Begun in March, the course structure is flexible, with modules offered and finished every two months. Much of the course employs computer-mediated communications between the students and Unimas, including using electronic mail, telnet/ftps, newsgroups and other Internet technologies via leased lines.

Course material is also accessible as Web pages on the Internet, and Unimas has set up videoconferencing facilities between its main campus and its office in Kuala Lumpur.

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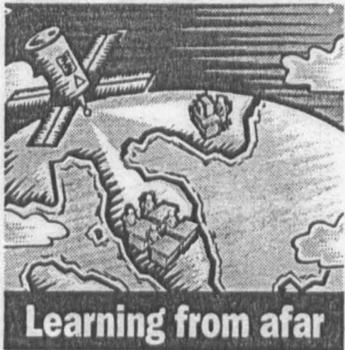
Zaidah Razak, Dean of Unimas' Faculty of Information Technology

Aiming to be as open a programme as possible, the course does not require students to have a personal Jaring account.

Instead they are given an Internet account on the network at Apiit. They also get to use the licenced software available on Apiit's network, which gives them experience they cannot get on a standalone system.

"We however encourage students who normally have their own computer at home to maintain a personal Internet account," Dr Zaidah says.

Students receive the course outline and some assignments at the beginning of the course to prepare them for the lecture period.



Learning from afar



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This might include case studies, references to articles, and short exercises to orient the student to the subject matter and help the lecturer get an idea of the general level of the class, as well as the knowledge each individual is bringing to the course.

In the first two weeks, assignments are short, concrete, and aim to facilitate communication between the students and the lecturer.

In its third week, the course becomes a period of intensive classwork, giving students the opportunity to get to know their lecturer personally, and to learn from their classmates.

"Since this is a graduate degree programme, it is as important for the students to contribute during this period as it is for the lecturer to present material," Dr Zaidah says.

The final phase is another period of guided self-study where rapport between students and lecturer increases further, and students are encouraged to keep in close contact with the lecturer via electronic mail.

A videoconferencing session might also be scheduled along with tutorials for students at Apiit offices.

Both the presentation of the course and the coursework includes multimedia technologies, advanced networking strategies, techniques for large and/or distributed systems, and exposure to different operating environments.

"We can't expect every student to have access to an enterprise network in the home or office, so we provide access to these facilities through Apiit, the Unimas office in KL, and via the Internet," Dr Zaidah says.

Unimas is also focusing on developing supporting technologies like hypermedia, visualisation/simulation, broadband networking, the use

of second generation Web servers, information filtering, interfaces and dynamic links.

Dr Zaidah claims Unimas is a leader in the adoption of techniques for presenting coursework and developing advanced, "information rich" learning environments.

"Across the world, universities face two major obstacles: The time it takes to prepare high quality teaching materials, and the physical infrastructure that audio and video-

enhanced multimedia require," she says.

"This places demands on human and physical resources, thus defining the constraints we must work within, and relative to which our progress must be measured," she adds.

While IDL has been hailed in some countries as a means to provide education to the poorer segments of society, Unimas has no plans yet to bring the benefits of IDL

to the masses, many of whom cannot afford to buy a PC of their own.

"We realise this is an important issue, but have not yet addressed it at the moment," Dr Zaidah admits. "It is however under consideration and an announcement will be made only when plans have 'gelled' and made viable."

Dr Zaidah can be reached at (082) 671-000, extn 370, or fax (082) 672-301, or at her Web page at <http://www.unimas.my>.

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