

Roles of education in digital economy

By Ahmad Kushairi

MALAYSIA must expand the use of technology in schools, businesses and homes if it is to meet the challenges of an increasingly competitive global digital economy.

There must be a greater sense of commitment, funding levels must be raised, and there must be a greater co-ordination between legislators, educators, the corporate sectors and the community.

In addition to that, a shift in the disposition of educators towards teaching-learning is required in not just the use of information technology (IT) as an enabler, but also in the development of capability.

According to Unimas' vice chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Zawawi Ismail, this can be achieved by giving students greater responsibility for their own learning and requiring them to explore and explain its relevance to their own development and to the wider

Malaysia is determined to be at the forefront of the new era of economic supremacy – the digital economy – not only at the regional level, but also at the global scale, and at the same time, transform the nation into a knowledge society. All these are going to be done by the year 2020.

It is indeed an ambitious goal but nonetheless, achievable. For Malaysia, the medium to achieve this is through the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), which development is well under way.

Multimedia Development Corporation Sdn Bhd (MDC) has been entrusted with the overall responsibility of overseeing the development of the MSC, including convincing key technology-based multinational corporations (MNCs) to establish operations in the corridor. Telekom Malaysia has been given the job to spearhead the task of establishing the state-of-the-art telecommunications infrastructure for the MSC.

All these are no doubt crucial to the success of the MSC initiative but in the long run, education remains the most important factor to ensure the country is able to sustain whatever it may achieve over the next couple of years. Universiti Malaysia Sarawak's (Unimas) vice chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Zawawi Ismail shares his thoughts on this matter.

community.

"We must invest more in the development of a learning society that can adapt to change," he said.

Given that the present education system incorporates the usage of computers, he stressed that it is not difficult to produce a society of computer liter-

ates. However, to be able to disseminate, handle, or acquire relevant information requires skills.

"It is easier for a newer university like Unimas to start up with cross-disciplines like combining Business Studies with information technology to prepare techno-entrepre-

neurs of the digital economy era," he said.

As it is now, said Zawawi, there is insufficient collaboration between universities and the corporate sectors for professional training programmes. The existing collaboration is seen as not enough.

He added that while universities are opening their programmes to the corporate sector, corporations should also come forward and request special programmes tailored to their needs for professionals.

For example, a company can come forward and request for a special executive Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programmes tailored to their needs on problem solving using IT.

Zawawi said in a digital economy, information skills and, more than ever, the basic skills of reading-writing in a language, mathematics, presentation and critical thinking/problem solving are likely to be required in work of all kinds.

"The particular information-handling skills to be emphasised include litera-



Zawawi: More investment needed in the development of a learning society that can adapt to change.

cy and functionality, calculation/compilation and retrieval, composition and presentation, and communication and collaboration," he said.

On the MSC, Zawawi emphasised that the corridor is not intended to be, and should not develop into an exclusive enclave of modernity, but should apply to education as well.

He said while the multi-

media university may have a clearly-defined role, an inclusive rather than an exclusive stand is more likely to see the effective discharge of that role, like the strengths and core competencies of existing universities, regardless of their location vis-a-vis the MSC, should be harnessed rather than ignored.

The inclusive principle applies also to research and development and university-industry partnerships. Established R&D programmes in existing universities should be exploited to jump-start and accelerate planned MSC activities, for example the proposed R&D cluster.

And commercialisable results and expertise from existing laboratories present immediate opportunities for university-industry ventures," he said.

In addition, Zawawi said, if the MSC is to have nationwide impact, the lessons learnt from initiatives carried out within it must be disseminated, and proven best practices replicated and used elsewhere – clearly a key role for all universities.