KUCHING, Thurs. — Universiti Malaysia Sarawak is scheduled to start its degree course in nursing in May next year.

Its Vice-Chancellor. Professor Datuk Dr Zawawi Ismail, said Unimas has the necessary staff and was prepared to offer the four-year degree programme.

He said the first batch of students would number between 30 and 40, and studies would commence in May next year.

"This nursing programme is similar to our medical course in that it will be a problem-based kind of learning," he said.

Zawawi said this at a Press conference after a Memorandum of Understanding signing ceremony between the university and Telekom Malaysia at the Unimas campus in Kota Samarahan today.

The MoU seeks to increase the areas of cooperation between the two bodies such as in research, information sharing and sharing of academic materials, exchange of expertise and personnel, and co-sponsorship of special programmes.

The MoU also marks the provision of the "Televarsiti" service by Telekom to the students and faculty members. "Televarsiti," which is based on the "Interactive Voice and Fax Response" system, contains information on student registration and examination results.

Zawawi signed on behalf of the university while Telekom was represented by its senior vice president of Network Services Syed Mustaffa Syed Ali. The ceremony was witnessed by Unimas Council chairman Tan Sri Rujang Mohd Nor.

Zawawi also said two institutes would be set up by Unimas later this year. One is the Institute of East Asian Studies and the other is the Institute of Design and Ergonomic Applications.

On distance learning, Zawawi said Unimas was considering the proposal a year ago, and if everything goes according to plan, the late next year or early 1998. So far, we have pockets of work on this project which started about a year ago. We are now trying to work on this and have at the moment," he said.

Zawawi said he could not reveal the type of courses would be offered under this type of learning because everything was basically still at an experimental stage.

He, however, pointed out that many things needed to be looked into before such a programme could be offered.

Among the requirements is that the students must have multi-media terminals.

"What we mean is that the recipients must have multi-media terminals," he said.

On staff shortage, Zawawi said Unimas was short of staff in all areas and that about 100 vacancies existed in the university.

At the moment, Unimas has about 230 academic staff and of this 30 per cent are expatriates.

"This shortage is quite a critical issue. For instance, we want to expand our engineering division but we cannot do it because there's nobody around to teach," he said.

"Many of the qualified engineers are not keen to be academicians because working in the private sector is more lucrative. As an example, a fresh engineer can easily get a monthly salary of about RM2,000 outside while an academician, even one with a PhD, can't command such a salary. Hopefully corporatisation later on can address this matter," he said.

Among other things, Syed Mustaffa said that Telekom Malaysia was determined to foster closer and stronger relationships with institutions of higher learning in the country.

This was to create, he said, an environment which encouraged research to produce new technologies by Malaysians, thus, reducing the dependence on foreign technologies.