

A British 'first' for Hertfordshire

By SIMRIT KAUR

THE University of Hertfordshire goes down in Malaysian annals by becoming the first British institution to offer an entire degree programme locally with a local private college.

Hertfordshire consented to validate Inti's qualification - a one-year Graduate Diploma (GD) - as being equal to its own Bachelor of Business Administration (Hons).

Students who enrol at Inti will gain a dual qualification - a GD and a Bachelor's degree from Hertfordshire.

"We agreed that work done on the GD is equivalent to an Honours degree programme at Hertfordshire.

"Inti is fairly well advanced and it is a natural progression for them to take on the full programme," Hertfordshire's vice-chancellor and chief executive officer Prof Neil K. Buxton said in an interview.

He said Hertfordshire held the Malaysian colleges it worked with in high regard.

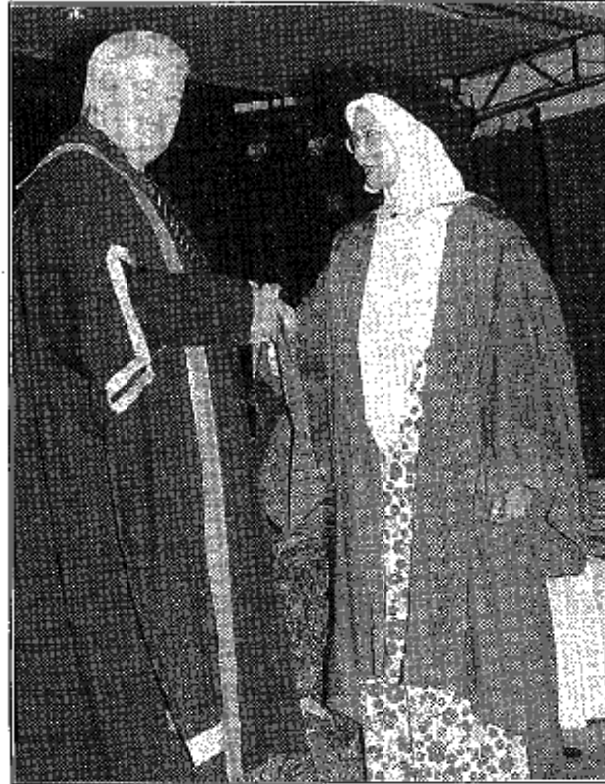
"However, we ensure that strict quality control mechanisms are applied to achieve the high standards that we have set," he added.

Franchising is not new to Prof Buxton or Hertfordshire. The university already offers such degree programmes in China, the Netherlands, Spain, Germany and some other European countries.

"The procedure is fairly standard," disclosed Prof Buxton, who was in Kuala Lumpur to attend the university's convocation ceremony on March 8. About two dozen academics flew in for the second graduation ceremony held here by the university. This year, 250 students graduated from various Hertfordshire twinning programmes.

There are currently more than 400 Malaysian students enrolled on courses offered by Hertfordshire's 30 local partners.

Prof Buxton felt it was only a



JOYOUS DAY... Prof Buxton conferring a PhD during the convocation ceremony.

matter of time before the degree programme was introduced in Malaysia, irrespective of the economic slowdown.

"I believe it (the slowdown) only hastened the 3+0 introduction by 18 months."

The dual qualification route taken by Inti was prompted by existing local regulations which bar private colleges from awarding their own degrees.

The guidelines for "3+0", as the full degree franchising is commonly referred to in Malaysia, was announced by Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak on March 11.

One of the key points of the concept was for local colleges to franchise only with reputable universities with a high standing in their respective countries.

Najib's announcement came four months after Hertfordshire signed an MoU with Inti on Dec 10 to offer its degree programme locally.

Hertfordshire, which began as a polytechnic in 1970, is considered among the "new age" universities in Britain which are at the forefront of radical and far-reaching partnerships with private institutions overseas.

These universities, which number about 30, were formed in 1992 when polytechnics were upgraded and given university status in a bid by British authorities to liberalise their higher education sector.

"New universities tend to be more enterprising, adaptable and market oriented," observed Prof Buxton.

He added that new universities were also quick to identify coun-

tries with potential to become future growth areas.

"On the other hand, most of the traditional universities have not been as active overseas and as adaptable as they could be."

On the branch campuses to be set up in Malaysia by foreign universities, Prof Buxton said the matter needed to be studied in detail as "foreign universities would have to surrender control to the home country where the campus is located."

Setting up an associate college here as some private colleges had done was not the best option either as it "would limit the range of choices that Malaysians have", he added.

Prof Buxton is a firm believer in the importance of teaching and not just research at universities.

"Teaching in many universities have taken a back seat as the Higher Education Funding Council uses research, and not teaching, as the yardstick for consideration."

Things might change though as Prof Buxton said there was a proposal that teaching should and would be taken into consideration.

"In a mixed economy, the teaching and research in a university should go hand in hand as research informs teaching."

The vice-chancellor brings a strong financial and economic dimension to his administration of the university.

His views are peppered with financial terms and he espouses a market-driven theory.

"In the mixed economy of higher education, there are various routes to higher education qualifications and new universities look for various forms and ways to satisfy the market."

While Hertfordshire is not considered a research-led university, it was ranked top of the league in terms of its relationship with industry and in bringing in new research money.

The Scotsman also believes that many people fail to discriminate

between the best and the rest of British universities.

"The top 15 universities in Britain capture 85% of the research money; we need to distinguish between the major research universities and the other traditional as well as newer universities."

"There is a tendency to regard traditional universities as being on par with the Ivy League ones. In fact, new universities like Hertfordshire out-compete most traditional universities."

While promoting franchising, Prof Buxton is aware that both British universities and Malaysian students stand to lose under this new trend.

For one, the arrangement would inevitably result in fewer Malaysians making their way to Hertfordshire's campuses in Britain and this means they would miss a great deal in terms of exposure.

He nevertheless hopes that those who can afford to would still make a trip to sample life in a foreign land.

"Despite the current circumstances, many parents want their children to go abroad, and I hope many more will do so when the economic situation improves."

On the question of professional recognition for some courses, Prof Buxton is not convinced that it is absolutely necessary for all degrees to be accredited by their professional bodies.

"Many of the regulations pertain to entry qualifications. There is a great debate on this because if such restrictions are enforced it would exclude mature students."

"To me, output levels are more important than input levels and the Engineering Council in Britain is considering whether it needs to give all engineering degrees professional accreditation."

Prof Buxton's final words is to give newer universities a chance to prove themselves as "it takes time to establish a reputation."