

E-education here to stay

INSTITUTIONS of higher learning worldwide are striving to think globally and act locally - thanks to the information and communications technology push.

Like every other sector, education too must evolve to accommodate and adopt ICT. As author Ernest Boyer says, "Even the best of our institutions must continuously evolve. And to sustain the vitality of higher education in our time, a new vision of scholarship is required, one dedicated not only to the renewal of the academy but ultimately, to the renewal of society itself."

University of Hertfordshire's pro-vice chancellor R J T Wilson, speaking at the International Conference

precedence over the learning process.

This message came across loud and clear during the two-day conference organised by Inti Foundation in conjunction with the 15th anniversary celebration of the Inti International Group of Colleges.

The conference focused on the implementation and management of ICT in e-education, with special emphasis on learning. It proved a fruitful session for the 200-plus participants who gained a wide perspective of the issue from the international panel of presenters.

According to Prof Anthony Zwart of New Zealand's Lincoln University, the danger in e-education and e-learning in particular, lies in that the focus has been on the technology and access to information rather than needs of individual learners.

"There is a need for a careful integration of the IT capability and individual student needs," he said.

As many of the participants agreed, this concern had in fact deterred many universities from adopting e-education.

On an optimistic note, Open University Malaysia (OUM) president Tan Sri Dr Abdullah Samad said: "The experience of many in distance learning has indicated that, if properly administered and managed, there is no significant difference between the outcomes of teaching-learning in traditional face-to-face and distance learning modes."

"In fact, there are indications that online and distance learning, especially at the post-basic and graduate levels, actually enhances educational outcomes in some disciplines."

In his paper "Experience of Open Universities in Asia Pacific Countries", he said that successful distance learning must satisfy both academic requirements and meet students' needs.

Prof Roy Leitch of Heriot-Watt University, Scotland, said the current shift from lecturer-centred learning to student-centred was a good move as people learn at different rates.

To overcome the weakness of the transmission model of delivering education, which essentially assumes synchronous learning, Prof Leitch said many institutions have explored learning models that "put the student more in control of the knowledge reception

process and allows learning to be matched to student preferences, abilities and constraints".

The irony here lies in the reality that "putting the student in control" demands a certain level of technological advancement. Universities have, however, done well in this area, gauging from reports from the conference.

From the basic live video-taping of lectures for online delivery to virtual physical interaction (as was most entertainingly presented by Prof Xuewei Sun from Tsinghua University in Beijing), the avenues are abundant. It was also evident that no one model for delivery was acceptable as "the model" since development was still at its infancy. A common challenge to universities was in dealing with access to education.

"The advantages of e-learning cannot be fully realised by all nations in the Asia Pacific region until the limitations of connectivity and computer literacy are overcome. There still exists a large divide between the Asian nations in terms of Internet connectivity," argued Prof Abdullah

Samad. Using the per capita percent of users of the Internet as an example, he said the most connected group was Singapore with 29.5% Internet users and Hong Kong, which has 25.2%. This was followed by Korea and Japan (each just over 14%), Malaysia (6.9%), Thailand (1.3%) and China (0.7%).

Furthermore, he explained that there was still a disparity in the region in present infrastructure for fast communications.

"Malaysia, for example, has an adequate layout of microwave, cable and satellite communications within the country, but the cost of using all these support systems is still prohibitive when they are to be used for distance education," he said, adding however that the problems of connectivity and digital literacy would be resolved over time. As for universities, the way forward was in commercial collaborations.

"It appears, therefore, that only those traditional providers with large enough financial resources to provide learner-centred education for the masses will survive and prosper."

Hence, he added, collaboration with relevant organisations represented a possible solution.

Energy, Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Amar Leo Moggie raised the issue of content in his opening speech and urged Malaysians to develop local intellectual property.

"Digital gaps as encountered today are not only due to the lack of communication facilities but also the lack of content. Here, the best sources for content are faculty members and academicians themselves and institutions of learning," he said.

The minister also reminded conference participants of the government's RM10million allocation under the Eight Malaysia Plan to establish a Content Development Fund to stimulate the growth of a "competitive, dynamic and sustainable creative multimedia content industry".

No doubt, says online education entrepreneur Terry Hillsberg, "E-education is big business".

Since the industry was still at an early stage of evolution, greater things could be expected from e-education.



Successful distance learning must satisfy academic requirements and meet students' needs.

on E-Education (ICEE) 2001 recently, said universities now were left with little choice but to adopt e-education or face the consequences.

Touching on the various aspects of e-education, namely e-management and intellectual property, he stated that: "E-education is a generic concept embracing e-learning, e-management and e-administration."

His paper on re-engineering organisational culture argued that it was the effective management of the "inevitably disruptive" transformations brought by e-education that determined its success.

Prof Wilson said the transition from being a university which offered traditional programmes using traditional methodologies to one that embraced e-education required a major re-engineering exercise - one that embraced the culture of the institution.

"There are two central elements to the process - a consistency of vision in terms of strategic marketing and a consistency of leadership during the transitional stages," he added.

However, crucial to all developments is the need to be "high tech and high touch", in other words, technological advancement must never take