

They have been through it all, weathered the worst economic storms and emerged stronger and more determined than ever. This monthly column looks at that rare breed of entrepreneurs and self-made businessmen and their recipe for success.

IT'S HARD to put a finger on the hat Tan Yew Sing actually wears — academician or businessman. As the managing director of INTI Universal Holdings Bhd, Tan sits on a growing empire of private colleges bearing the INTI name, scattered across Malaysia and the region.

Tan admits he's no full-fledged academician, neither is he a conventional businessman. 'I'm an "edupreneur",' he states proudly. 'While a businessman looks only at the bottomline and strives to increase it with whatever it takes, an edupreneur comes up with new ideas on how to run educational programmes with social responsibilities in mind.'

This, he says, is how he built up INTI into one of the leading educational institutions in the country. The group now boasts some 13,000 students in its five local campuses — INTI College Malaysia in Nilai, INTI College Subang Jaya, INTI International College Penang, INTI College Sabah and INTI College Sarawak.

The group also established its presence in several other countries with Beijing INTI Management College, China; St Theresa INTI College, Thailand; INTI College Indonesia; INTI College Hong Kong; International College of IT & Management, Vietnam; and the INTI-Lincoln University Co Campus, New Zealand.

Not bad for a college that started just 16 years ago with a mere 37 students ... the seeds of Tan's vision.

Tan, the third of seven children, was born 47 years ago in Klang. He received his early education at Pin Hwa Primary School, Kwang Hua High School and Klang High School. The son of a property developer, he had the opportunity to further his studies in the United Kingdom. He obtained a Bachelor of Science (Honours) degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Leeds in 1979 and a Masters in Business Administration, majoring in Management Science, from City University, London.

Upon his graduation, he worked as a civil engineer in a UK consultancy firm before returning to Malaysia. He joined his father's company as a project manager and soon ventured out with a partner to start his own property-development company in 1985.

Despite his formal training, Tan had a heart for education. He volunteered to serve at the boards of several secondary schools, including his alma mater Kwang Hua, where he was once head prefect. At that time, in the mid-1980s, he found out about a unique credit-transfer programme that Institute Teknologi Mara (ITM) had with American universities, via a partnership with the Mid-Western University Consortium for International Education (MUCIA).

'I got some lecturers at ITM to explain the system to me, and I saw that it was an innovative way of arranging further studies,' Tan tells *Malaysian Business*. 'During my time, I had many classmates who worked hard, but they had no opportunity to go overseas. To me, tertiary education is important for social mobility, to build up maturity, personality and critical thinking in a person. Thus, I was interested to introduce an alternative route to quality further education to the larger Malaysian public.'

Spurred by that vision, Tan rallied a few of his academician friends from various local universities to brainstorm with him. In 1986, Tan, together with four partners, Tan Sri Dr Abdul Majid Ismail, Chia Song Kun, Low Sik Thong and Teng Choon Kwang, founded the INTI Higher Learning Centre with a seed capital of RM1 million.

'I resigned from my property development company,' Tan recalls. 'I thought I would go in and build up the college for a few years only, but after starting it, I found it very fulfilling. It's a career more suited to my personality, to what I want to achieve.'

In the beginning, the college, located at Bangunan Sim Lim along Jalan Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur, had a staff of three — Tan, a secretary and an office boy. Lecturers

Tapping Power

Tan Yew Sing, the force behind INTI Today, he can be proud that his vision of education more accessible to Malaysia.

By Joanna Sze

were employed on a part-time basis, and the student population numbered 37.

That same year, the education industry was liberalised. The private sector was encouraged to invest in education, with the freedom to determine curricula in partnership with foreign universities. Even with the Government's support, though, challenges abounded.

'We had to make ourselves known,' Tan says. The college embarked on a heavy promotional blitz, moving from town to town to introduce itself. 'People used to regard private colleges as a place for dropouts. We had to convince parents to accept us as serious players. Traditional academicians were skeptical.'

Since then, the college has beaten the odds. 'We draw the top students and have proven ourselves with the number of students having graduated with first-class honours from top British universities,' he says.