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Road map for research

With a new head at the helm, Multimedia University will be placing equal emphasis on research and academic activities.

By **TAN SHIOW CHIN**
educate@thestar.com.my

Multimedia University (MMU) president Prof Dr Zaharin Yusof jokingly shares that his colleagues and friends are calling him a "serial road-mapper". This is because he has produced three road maps within the last few years — one each for his times at Mimos, Universiti Tenaga Nasional and MMU.

Although the former Universiti Sains Malaysia School of Computer Sciences dean will not be able to see the outcome of the road maps for the first two bodies, he hopes to be able to see MMU's five-year road map through.

Tapping the two-inch thick hardcover book in front of him at a recent interview, Prof Zaharin says with a smile: "This will be our 'bible' for the next few years."

The road map is the blueprint for MMU's research and development (R&D) initiatives from now till 2013.

Says Prof Zaharin: "Essentially, I have always believed that to get quality education, it must be supported by R&D."

"With R&D, the programmes will come alive, and be more relevant and more niche."

He adds that along with research comes the desire to commercialise one's findings, "not only for the money, but also the gratification of knowing your work is relevant".

In addition, the money generated by commercialising research findings will be helpful in funding the university.

"We also need the money because we are financially self-sufficient. We cannot live off (student) fees alone — they account for only 90% of our expenditure."

Having been appointed to his position only in January, Prof Zaharin shares that one of the first things he has done as MMU president was to reorganise the senior management structure.

"Apart from Operations, R&D is now the

biggest division (in the university).

"Initially, there was only one vice-president (VP) for academics, R&D and postgraduate studies. We have one VP in charge of academics and one VP for R&D only; and he is helped by three deans of research."

The other divisions in the university have also been reorganised to help support MMU's two main foci of academics and R&D.

He says: "Previously, the focus of the university was education; there was research done, but it was on a small scale and mainly for publication purposes."

"Now, we will still publish, but we also want to look at high impact projects."

As the university's niche area is telecommunications, the road map has the ultimate objective of "making sure that anyone can communicate anywhere at any time".

This includes not only the tools for communication, but also the management of the vast amount of knowledge available through such tools.

"We want to work on knowledge management from both a technical and management point of view," he says, adding that this includes the acquisition, dissemination and application of knowledge as well as the tools required to do those tasks.

Cross-disciplinary programmes

Not forgetting the academic responsibilities of the university, Prof Zaharin also hopes to come up with a roadmap detailing MMU's direction in education soon.

"We now have around 120 programmes, which is quite a fair bit. We are going through the process of rationalising the programmes and trying to get more focused and relevant."

He adds that this is especially so in the

area of information technology (IT), where what was relevant 10 years ago may not be so relevant now.

"We're probably going to be looking at programmes that will encompass various disciplines, rather than programmes that are disciplined-based."

He gives the example of knowledge management, which crosses the disciplines of engineering, IT, creative multimedia and management.

"We also have life informatics, which will be a major area in the future, and which will also make use of all our faculties."

In the pursuit of this goal, Prof Zaharin says that his staff members are taking turns to attend an ongoing series of retreats held over the weekends.

"Currently, we are going through a series of retreats to tighten all this up," he says, joking that he doesn't have a free weekend until the fasting month in September.

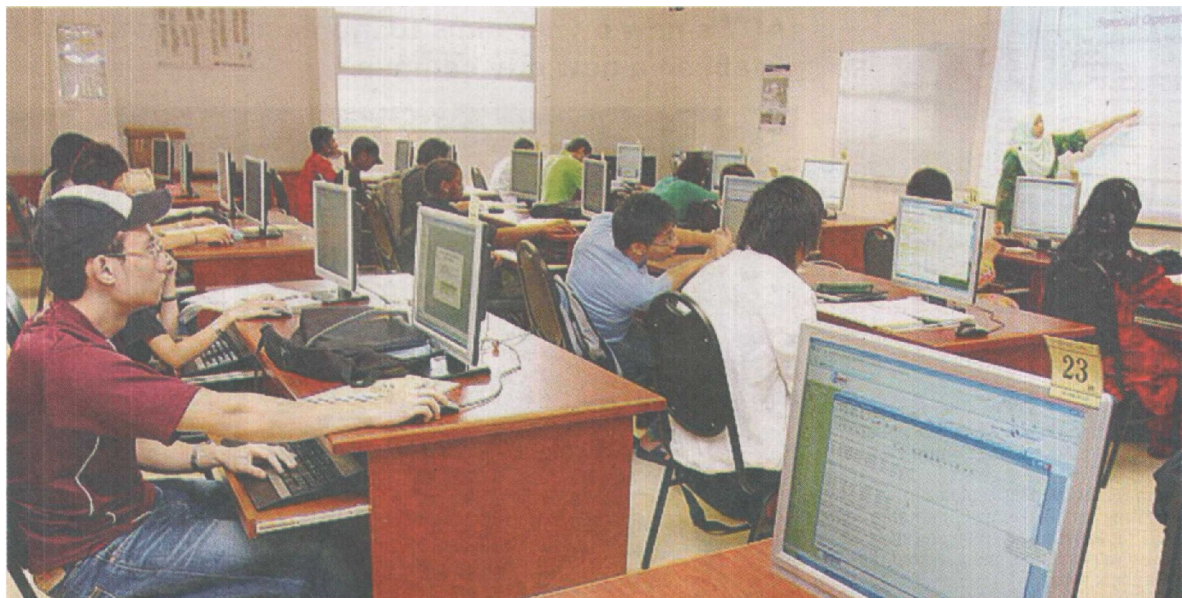
He hopes to be able to produce a complete academic road map for MMU by next year, and begin implementing the new cross-faculty programmes within the next few years, taking into account the time needed to get the programmes approved by the Higher Education Ministry.

His ultimate vision for the university?

"We want to be seen not only as an R&D university, but also as a software engineering consultancy and of course, as a provider of very relevant niche programmes."

MMU is a contributor to the Star Education Fund.

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A class at MMU. The university will trim the number of programmes it offers and make them more focused and relevant.



MMU President Prof Zaharin has reorganised the senior management structure to facilitate the focus on R&D.