Tapping creative juices

BY CORDELIA LEE

Do local universities and colleges have what it takes to succeed in the R&D world?

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Local talent: Kwong with a demo copy of the Inventory Biz software.

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LACK OF EXPOSURE

Although the product features may seem rather elementary to some, the hard work that was put into it certainly deserves recognition.

Kwong, who started developing the software during her student days at Sunway College, points out that the problem faced by undergraduates is simply the lack of knowledge and business experience of the outside world.

Hence, a lot of time is spent doing analysis and research.

The good news is, this has in no way discouraged the students from brainstorming new product ideas and solutions. Other R&D projects include tourism, broadcasting, e-commerce solutions for small and medium businesses, handwriting recognition, robotics, and online courses.

Come next month, Sunway's R&D unit is planning to launch an online tutorial called Interactive Biology for Form Four and Form Five students.

Already, some three to four secondary schools are testing it, informs Kanendran T Arulrajah, director, school of information and multimedia, Sunway College. One of which is the Assunta Secondary School in Petaling Jaya.

Million annually as seed money for the different faculties to conduct research activities.

WORKING WITH INDUSTRY

For most universities and institutions of higher learning, figuring out how to commercialise their R&D results often pose a formidable challenge.

"One can spend a lot of time developing new technologies but if you can't bring these results to the industry, then it is somewhat pointless," comments Professor Chuah Hanzel Teik, dean, Faculty of Engineering, Multimedia University.

Hence, Chuah, who is also the director, centre for research and postgraduate programmes, insists that stronger collaboration with industry partners, is important.

As such, MMU is currently working with the likes of IBM, Cisco, IBS, RQ Net, Alcatel, Nokia, and NTT Communications on various R&D initiatives. Many of these collaborations involve setting up labs, workshops, training of academic staff and students, as well as industrial training.

"If the company wants to solve a problem but they do not have the resources, they give us a grant and we work for them," informs Chuah.

"At the end of the day, they could either own the intellectual property (IP) or we both co-own the IP."

Last year, MMU had four patents being filed with NTT Communications under the wireless communications and optical communications categories.

It also received a RM400,000 grant from Matsushita to develop software for the next generation intelligent devices. At the moment, MMU allocates about RM10.5 million annually as seed money for the different faculties to conduct research activities.

PROMOTING ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

MMU's Centre for Commercialisation and Technopreneur Development (CCTD) currently looks after both the commercialisation of Multimedia University's research and also the development of technopreneurs among the university community.

"We help to provide seed money and development resources to ex-students of MMU, who want to set up their own companies," says Eddy Chong, head, Centre for Commercialisation and Technopreneur Development (CCTD).

Some shining examples are CarStudio.com, RiteUni.com, Radiant Technologies, e-Cube, Skyline, and Transys Technology.

To date, there are 13 start-up companies, of which three have already received funding. They are Carstudio.com, Rite Uni.com and MyBus Ticket.com.

According to Chong, the companies are encouraged to come out with a physical product within six months. Venture capitalists (VCs) are also invited to evaluate the students' ideas and presentations.

"We have no set allocation for funding as long as they have a viable business plan," he says, adding that CCTD gets between five and 10 proposals per month.

MMU will naturally take a minority stake in that particular start-up company but again, it is all based on negotiations.

Apart from trying to cultivate the culture and environment of entrepreneurship in the MMU community, CCTD today also facilitates the licensing procedure of copyright materials, trade marks, patents and industrial design.

To date, the university has received 11 patent applications, of which six have been filed and the rest pending.

Some of the patents include a callless mobile videophone, intelligent navigation system for e-learning, ergonomics finger press work aid, e-scroll and virtual reality telecommunication system.

"The university strives to improve its R&D activities and has been progressing very well. There are ample research opportunities provided to students, such as "final year projects as well as project competitions," informs Chong.

One of the projects by MMU called Orion involves the usage of short message service (SMS). Students are able to check their timetable and examination results via their handphone.

In the next phase, the R&D team is looking at incorporating more animation and interactive applications. MMU is also working with Ericsson on smart homes, although this is still at an early stage.

R&D

For Malaysia's R&D community to be vibrant and dynamic, there should be less bureaucracy and more entrepreneurial snafu, sums up Chuah.

"If a person is given everything under the sun, he is just a mediocre, but if a person can perform within constraints, he is a real achiever," he quips.

"The recipe for success is no big secret, the question is how serious are we about implementation."

R&D lab: Sunway College's Professional Information and Communication Technology laboratory (above).