

# AeU's **unique** online distance learning

> Blended learning also involves face-to-face tutorials

BY CHOW EE-TAN

**E**DUCATION and learning are changing so tremendously that a paradigm shift is needed when approaching higher education.

Asia e University (AeU) understands this need and embraces information technology as its mode of teaching.

An international university in collaboration with 32 member-countries under the Asia Cooperation Dialogue, AeU is established as a global education provider and prime enabler of e-education in Malaysia.

The School of Education and Cognitive Science is currently the largest faculty at AeU and it has about 2,000 undergraduates doing the Bachelor of Education programme, 300 taking the Masters of Education and 60 pursuing Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Education.

Prof Dr John Arul Phillips, dean of the school, says one KPI of a developing country is to have at least 60% of primary school teachers who are graduates. However, most Malaysian teachers are SPM and diploma holders—thus it's important to raise the standard of education qualification.

"A viable way to encourage them to go back to university is part-time learning where we bring the classroom to them. Our Bachelor of Education programme is dedicated to upgrade primary school

teachers with diplomas to degree qualification," says John, adding that the programme is accredited by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) under the Ministry of Higher Education.

As a university catering to working professionals, AeU relies on an online distance learning method with a blended learning approach. Blended learning is a combination of face-to-face tutorials and distance learning applied in an interactive learning environment.

There are 10 hours of face-to-face tutorials that are conducted over weekends in 18 centres all over the country.

"Students meet an average once a month with our academic facilitators and the balance is made up by full materials that are downloaded through our personalised learning system over the internet," says John.

The programme focuses on three areas: Teaching of Bahasa Malayu, TEASL (Teaching English as second language) and Early Childhood Education. It takes four years to complete the degree and the university expects its first batch of teachers to graduate early next year.

Besides school teachers, there are people from all walks of life interested to enter into the field of education. For their Masters of Education programme, 80% to 90% of students are from the private sector.

"There is a growing demand for training and development. Today, many people who deal with adult learners are practising education without the proper knowledge and without knowing the theory," John says.

The Masters programme contains 10 different specialisations, including popular areas like nursing education, early childhood education, educational psychology and education management. The number of students entering this programme is growing, and under the government's open-entry admission policy, non-graduates with relevant working experiences can apply to do a Master's degree course.

Another programme that is gaining popularity is the Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Education, where majority of the current students are kindergarten teachers. Only a very small percentage of early childhood educators have relevant qualifications, says John, adding that after completing the two-year course, students can go on to obtain a bachelor's degree with an additional two years of courses.

For John and the educationists at AeU, the usage of information technology through distance learning is the way to go.

"With internet and smart

phones, students are able to obtain all the information online and download them. We make sure everything essential is available online for our adult students," he says. AeU has a comprehensive digital library where students can do research and download information.

The course also sees the use of a lot of video clips from Youtube to explain the concepts. "The new generation prefer watching videos than listening to a life lecture. Knowledge is now presented in the form of video that has become a tool," says John.

Recently, the faculty started exploring the usage of social media such as Facebook as a platform for discussions. It was tried out in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah last semester and was well received. They are also looking at Twitter and in the future, Wiki for their projects.

John says although their students stay in different geographical locations, they are all well connected. "We also provide an iPad for each undergraduate as a teaching-learning tool, and in the future it can become a communication tool with the use of Facetime," he adds.

He says even prestigious universities like Harvard and Duke have distant learning programmes.

"Everything we can learn is centred around the internet and its tools. At AeU, we are leveraging on it but we can still do more," he says.

John: "We make sure everything essential is available online for our adult students."

