

Bridging the digital divide

COCA-COLA, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Education Ministry recently announced a new partnership and pilot project to spearhead efforts to narrow the digital divide in Malaysia.

In this new initiative, called "e-learning for life", the three partners will bring e-learning opportunities and information and communications technology (ICT) resources to students, teachers and local communities nationwide, supporting youth learning, education and community development.

Education Ministry secretary general Datuk Ambrin Buang launched the initiative at a signing ceremony on behalf of its minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad.

In a video message screened at the launch of the project, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad commended Coca-Cola and the UNDP for an "innovative and timely initiative (that) will help many, many Malaysians to grasp the opportunities of the emerging Information Age".

"Bridging the information and

knowledge gap – not just between Malaysia and other nations, but between local communities in Malaysia itself – is an extremely important priority for us all as we move into the new global knowledge economy," said Dr Mahathir.

The project would also benefit from the guidance and experience of the UNDP, a world leader in using ICT to drive education and development, he added.

Coca-Cola Malaysia country manager Reiner Becker described the project as "an exciting 21st century chapter in Coca-Cola's support of youth development and education in Malaysia".

"We're proud to be partnering with UNDP and the Education Ministry in bringing the promise of e-learning to a new generation of students and teachers," said Becker.

"Bridging the digital divide is a priority area of work for UNDP around the world. In Malaysia, this initiative with the Education Ministry will pioneer an innovative approach to access by opening the schools to the community after-school hours, with professional



Ambrin (centre), Becker (right) and Olson at the ceremony.

guidance so that the same computer resources can serve both students and their families," said UNDP head in Malaysia Maxine Olson.

"This work complements other UNDP initiatives in Malaysia which focus on collective learning about effective approaches to bridging the digital divide and sharing Malaysia's experiences with other countries in Asia and Africa."

The management of the project is provided by the Kuala Lumpur-based Asia-Pacific Development Information Programme (APDIP)/UNDP, an organisation created and funded by UNDP to promote and establish information technology (IT) systems for social and eco-

nomonic development throughout Asia Pacific.

The "e-learning for life" project supports the government's knowledge-based economy (k-economy) vision and the Education Ministry's drive to bring Internet access and e-learning resources to Malaysian classrooms and communities.

The project will set up ICT "hubs" in selected secondary schools across Malaysia equipped with state-of-the-art hardware, educational software and Internet connectivity, providing thousands of students and teachers with access to training in ICT.

The first of these centres is scheduled to be launched later this year in Kedah.

Under the leadership of the Education Ministry, teachers will receive ICT training and the ICT "hub" schools will integrate computer lab-based training into existing curricula.

Extending the reach of the programme, other schools, students and community members in the vicinity will also have access to each ICT "hub" and its web-based teaching contents.

In addition, a core group of students and teachers will be trained as "peer trainers" to transfer their ICT skills and knowledge to others in the hub area.

Coca-Cola and the UNDP are contributing a total of US\$360,000 (RM1.3mil) towards the first phase of the project.