

By Nur Alda Mustaffa

INFORMATION technology (IT), to some, is an expensive affair. It divides the urban and the rural, the rich and the poor. While the urban folk can afford to enjoy its benefits in their homes, schools, cybercafes and computer centres, what about the rural folk?

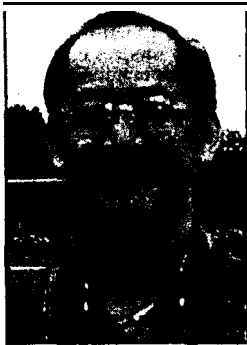
A solution as to how people in rural areas can have access to computers and Internet facilities comes in the form of Mimos Bhd's Mobile Internet Unit (MIU). Recently, the unit headed towards two schools in Ladang Glendale in Bahau, Negri Sembilan - Sekolah Menengah Lui Barat (SMLB) and Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina) Ladang Glendale.

Located about 120 kilometres south of Kuala Lumpur, it was difficult to believe that many of the students in these schools had never handled a computer. And it was astonishing to see their eagerness to become acquainted with technology.

When the MIU bus moved into the school grounds, students and their parents were already in queue, hoping to be among the first to use the computers.

The notion that people in rural areas are reluctant to accept computers and the Internet and see them as an intrusion into their way of life is flawed.

In fact, it was his enthusiasm that got Tan Hock Seng, acting afternoon supervisor for SMLB and his wife Ng Wee Gwek, a teacher at SRJK (C) Ladang Glendale, to make the request for the MIU bus to make a stop-over at their schools.



Tan: Rural folk eager to acquire computer skills.

their children to become computer literate and were willing to pay the monthly fees. But the company failed us and until now the children have no other way of acquiring computer knowledge," he says.

Nurziehan Ahmad Ngadiman, a Form Five student of SMLB wishes that the village's community hall could be converted into a computer training centre for children and adults.

Thirteen-year-old Amzaidin Amirudin hopes more personal computers (PCs) are placed in schools or at the community centres to help children get acquainted with technology as the future is highly dependent on technology.

Rural schools in need of computer centres

"The eagerness, enthusiasm and desire to acquire computer skills are all there but the only problem is that the community cannot afford it," says Tan. The community is largely made up of Felda settlers and rubber tappers.

Each school has two personal computers which are strictly used for administrative purposes. The only source of computer access is in a cybercafe in Bahau, located about 20km from the village. However, the charges are exorbitant. Users are charged RM3.50 of every half hour - which is even higher than the charges in Kuala Lumpur!

According to Tan, SMLB had early this year contracted a computer training company to conduct computer lessons for its 1,800 students. However, the company left a few months later after collecting the fees.

"Many students enrolled for the class and paid the registration fees. Parents were equally excited for

"We heard about computers and the Internet many times from the teachers, relatives in town and also from the television, but we did not know what it meant exactly until now. We wish our families can afford to buy PCs or our school let us use the PCs," said Lee Ming Soon and Abdul Hamid Ipin, both Standard Two students of SRJK (C) Ladang Glendale who were queuing to use the facilities on board the MIU bus. The same views were echoed by other children on that day.

SRJK (C) Ladang Glendale Parents-Teacher Association's vice president Chia Poun Tong hopes the State Government will step in to provide computer facilities for the children or adopt the MIU concept.

The MIU concept, he believes, is a more feasible solution to enable rural folk to acquire computer skills.

Mimos' MIU pilot project started last August involving a smart partnership

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MIU pilot project draws positive response

By Nur Aida Mustafa

MIMOS Berhad plans to work with several State Governments on the possibility of implementing its Mobile Internet Unit (MIU) concept at State level. This follows positive response to and the keen interest in the pilot MIU implementation by Mimos.

For a more effective expansion, however, Mimos calls on the Federal Government to consider rolling out a national-level MIU programme under the Eighth Malaysian Plan.

Launched in August this year, the MIU programme aims to provide electronic classroom experience for the students in schools that have no information and communication technology (ICT) facilities to contribute

to the main objective of reducing the big gap between the information-rich and information-poor of the country.

Since its launch, the mobile electronic classroom - which is actually a refurbished bus with various equipment, including 20 units of multimedia personal computers (PCs), projectors, servers and generators, with two well-trained facilitators - has visited sev-

eral rural schools in Selangor, Wilayah Persekutuan, Penang, Perak and Negri Sembilan.

However, a single mobile unit will not be able to meet the needs of all the people in the many remote areas in the country, and Mimos proposes a solution which calls for a national-level implementation of the programme by the Government.

According to Mimos' pres-

ident and chief executive officer Datuk Tengku Dr Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen, a few States have shown keen interest in the MIU concept and they include Penang, Sabah, Perak, Terengganu and Selangor.

"We see the usefulness and practicality of MIUs and are committed to expand its services to cover as many communities as possible. However, we will start with the States that have shown interest to have such units," he says.

Mimos, he says, also plans to present its findings from the response from schools on the MIU concept to the National Information Technology Council (NITC) as well as Federal and State Governments. This is to help get the necessary fundings for a big-scale MIU implementation.

He adds that Mimos also welcomes interested parties to work with the company to promote ICT literacy in rural communities.

Tengku Azzman also calls on schools in the rural areas to take on the initiative to promote ICT literacy among its students and the communities at large and not wait for help from the corporate world. It's vital for these schools to go into



Tengku Azzman: Keen interest in MIU concept.

Pilot project extended to include 20 schools in KL

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between the Education Ministry, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Automative Corporation (M) Sdn Bhd. Automative Corporation donated a bus or cyber coach while Mimos contributed 21 units of multimedia computers, a Web server and a team of Cyber Tour guides. UNDP, meanwhile, contributed about US\$75,000 (RM285,000) for the hardware, software and operation cost.

The total investment for the first pilot project which involved rural schools in Selangor was estimated at RM1.6 million.

Recently, the pilot project was extended to include 20 schools in Kuala Lumpur. The extended project is a collaborated effort with Pustaka Peringatan Kuala Lumpur (PPKL), a department under Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur.

MIU's project manager Kang Wai Chin says there



Chia: Feasible solution.

are three types of activities undertaken by the MIU. They are the school project, community service and special events.

Under the school project, MIU has adopted 20 schools in Selangor which it will visit regularly in fixed schedules until June next year. Under the community service projects, the unit will visit schools upon re-



First time: Children trying out the PCs in the MIU bus.

quest to introduce the Internet and information communication technology (ICT). The visit to the two schools in Bahau was under its community service projects. As for special events, Kang says, MIU will take part in various events held in the country to create IT awareness.

Schools that want the MIU service have to write

in or e-mail MIU at miu@mimos.my or visit its Web site at <http://www.miu.nitc.org.my>.

the electronic world as soon as possible.

He advises school management and Parents-Teacher Associations (PTAs) to be more aggressive and innovative in tapping funds from companies and the community.

As a start, he says, schools should set up computer clubs and invest in some multimedia PCs as well as obtain Internet access.

Once these basic facilities are in order, he adds, the schools need to organise computer training programmes to motivate teachers.