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# Collaboration the way forward

**DIGITAL TALENT HUBS:** Universities need to partner with giant tech companies to tap their expertise for projects, internships and exchange student programmes

**T**ECHNOLOGY is the backbone of a digital economy. To thrive in such an environment, we need a constant supply of workforce that is creative and innovative, with the knowledge and skills to use new technologies efficiently. We need a new generation of workers who can help transform the country into a producer of technology, and not merely a user.

At the recent 9th convocation of Universiti Sultan Azlan Shah, Sultan of Perak Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah rightly brought up the subject of how universities have a big challenge ahead to produce graduates for jobs of the future.

"Universities must produce students who are resilient to cope with changes in technology that will create new jobs, which may do away with

existing ones," he said.

The sultan reasserted the need for employers and universities to collaborate and identify the necessary skills and requirements to develop technology-oriented programmes to fuel the rise of the "digital workforce".

Universities, indeed, have a crucial role to play in the move towards the digital economy. The country will need a sufficient pool of bright, young people who are well-prepared to innovate and thrive in the competitive digital world. Transformation into the digital economy will be driven by a workforce that is competent in such areas as Internet of Things, big data analysis and cloud computing. These are among the areas that have been identified as the next frontier for innovation and productivity. The onus is on universities to ensure that such talents are continually nurtured and managed.

The importance of a digital workforce was never more emphasised at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Ministerial Meeting on Digital Economy in Cancun, Mexico, in June, which cited that jobs and skills, along with Internet openness and innovation, trust

in the digital economy and building global connectivity, as factors that will facilitate the smooth transition to the digital economy.

Universities, thus, need to stay ahead in the game to stay relevant in the digital economy. They need to evaluate their tech programmes from time to time. Technology evolves at a very fast pace and they must be efficient enough to adapt to these evolutions and generate programmes for producing a competent digital workforce. Areas such as cybersecurity and big data are said to be fundamental elements in revolutionising the digital economy. As it is, many universities in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia are already fine-tuning their programmes to produce the relevant talents in these areas.

To produce the future digital workforce, our universities also need to be open to collaboration with icons of the tech world like Intel, Cisco, Microsoft, Google and Facebook on educational projects, internship programmes, exchange student programmes and many more. This will enable the universities to tap into the expertise of the tech giants and become more effective in their role as digital talent hubs.

Cisco for example, is partnering with Curtin University in Perth to launch the site of the first Cisco Innovation Centre, as well as University of New South Wales in Sydney for the second site in Australia. Oxford University in the UK is also part-

nering up with Google to further develop its artificial intelligence technologies. The University City Science Center in the US has also announced a partnership and strategic alliance with Microsoft Corp with a focus on digital literacy recently.

Our universities must make the paradigm shift; they should no longer be standalone institutions. Collaboration is certainly the way forward and a win-win for all parties involved. The role of universities in providing graduates with the necessary skills needed for employment will remain, but in the digital economy, there will be more challenges and opportunities.

Universities will need to understand how digital technology is transforming the nature of work, where the opportunities for employment will lie and what skills and training the next generation of digital workers will need to thrive in the future economy.

At the same time, by growing their own digital capabilities, which include infrastructure, people and programmes, universities will ensure that they remain relevant in the digital economy, whose very foundation is built on creativity and innovation.

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