



BRINGING EVERYONE INTO THE INTERNET AGE

The USP programme is bringing Internet access to underprivileged populations across Malaysia. Md. Rusli visits two libraries in Terengganu that have been equipped with PCs and Internet connections for the use of the locals.

The Universal Service Provision (USP) programme, a global programme championed by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), strives to ensure that communication and Internet services reach outlying areas and isolated populations. Left to private initiatives alone, these marginalized areas would be left out as they would not be commercially viable.

In Malaysia, the push to narrow the digital divide has been entrusted to the SKMM. The government places great importance to bring modern communication services to every corner of the country and since the turn of the millennium, the SKMM has overseen projects that have

steadily reduced the numbers of areas that were not served by telecommunications services.

One common perception is that USP is all about bringing telecommunications services to underserved areas. That is certainly one of the aims of the USP project in which it improves infrastructure in areas that commercial interests tend to ignore. In that aspect, USP initiatives aid in progressively blotting out areas where communication services have failed to reach.

But there is another aspect to the USP programme, that of bridging the digital divide that exists among the population. The focus on improving infrastructure in underserved areas will not mean anything if underprivileged groups cannot make use of the infrastructure because of lack of

knowledge. For example, there is not much use to extend Internet coverage using USP funds into a rural area if the lower income people there cannot benefit because they are not able to afford computers or do not know how to use them. That would mean only the rich would benefit which is hardly the point that drives the USP programme.

Thus, the USP programme has also focused in improving access to communication services among underprivileged pockets of populations. One of the projects that have been implemented with notable success in 2007 is the provision of Internet access service to libraries located in underserved areas.

Bringing rural libraries into the Internet Age

The aim is to bring Internet access to communities that surround these libraries. This will help ensure the continued and even growth of a knowledge based society which is one of the main targets being pursued under the National Broadband Plan and the MyICMS 886 Strategy.

Planning for this project started in August 2006 and SKMM visited potential libraries in September 2006. Officers from State Library Organisations, USP service providers accompanied the SKMM officers on these visits. Also present were officers from the Public Works Department which was commissioned to monitor the project on behalf of SKMM.

These libraries were accessed for suitability. The selection of libraries for this project was based on feedback from the National Library of Malaysia and the State Library Organisations. These libraries had to be in areas where Internet penetration rates were low and which were surrounded by populations that were in the lower income brackets. Since there were similar projects undertaken by the Energy, Water & Communications Ministry, care was also taken to ensure that there were no duplication of efforts and that the libraries were not located near other areas that provided Internet access to the underprivileged.

Finally 78 libraries were identified within 89 USP districts as being suitable for implementation of the Internet access programme. The various USP service providers were then asked to submit draft proposals on each of these areas for the consideration of SKMM. These proposals were evaluated and the SKMM approved plans for 44 libraries which were submitted by TM and Maxis Mobile Sdn Bhd.

The project involved equipping the libraries with state of the art PCs and high speed Internet connections. Typically, each centre had six computers, a server, a printer and a broadband connection. To ensure effective usage, the project also had the provision to hire a supervisor who would run awareness and training programmes so that the target population could increase their IT skills. The supervisor would also monitor computer usage so that access was shared fairly among the users and also to prevent the PCs being used for non productive purposes.

The Terengganu experience

By mid 2007, implementation had been carried out in some areas. Among the areas that saw the implementation of the library Internet access project were the towns of Marang and Dungun in Terengganu.

Some months later, both areas have positive reports to share.

Marang is just a half hour drive south from the state capital, Kuala Terengganu. Once a fishing village, it has grown into a town. Tourism has also become a major economic activity. The town is also surrounded by villages. Many of the people who live here have no Internet access.

Haini Hamzah has served as Pembantu Perpustakaan (Library Assistant) for 27 years, all in the Marang library. She says that the response to the library Internet access project has been very encouraging. The facilities are so popular that the supervisor usually sets an hour limit on each user so that everyone gets a chance to use the facilities.

“The number of users has been increasing since we put in the PCs. During the school holidays, we get students the whole day round.” Other users include working people pursuing distance education, university students working on their assignments etc. Haini also said that they also get a number of small business owners and farmers coming in to access the Internet. For example, Haini said that a few fish prawn crackers (*keropok*) makers have been using the PCs to source for distributors outside the state.

According to Haini, the supervisor ran regular classes to train users how to use the PCs effectively. The classes were on basic PC usage as well as an introduction to common office applications.

The young people who use these new PCs live all across town and the surrounding villages. Wan Mohd Muttaqim lives in the village of Rhu Muda. He is in Primary 5 and was taught to use the PC by his older brother. Another user, Mohd Ikhwan is in Secondary 2 and he uses the facilities to access the ‘Score A’ online educational application as well as check his email.

A slightly older user was Zulhelmi, back home for holidays from University Putra Malaysia. He is a third year student in computer engineering and communication



Haini Hamzah



Dungun and Marang and their surrounding areas



Azmi Ibrahim

“
The young people who use these new PCs live all across town and the surrounding villages
 ”

Ernee Abdul Rahman



systems. Zulhelmi is from Kampong Kijing and he uses the SKMM provided facilities to catch up on news and the latest knowledge in his field of study. He feels that the move to provide free Internet access is excellent as it is bringing information to his hometown.

Over in Dungun, another town about one hour drive south of Marang, the report is even more glowing. Like Marang, this town has fishing villages and smallholdings surrounding it. Some of the residents also work in the petroleum industry as Terengganu’s oil facilities are located not far from it.

‘Business’ is booming in the Dungun library. The library officer, Azmi Ibrahim, says that they are facing a problem, they have too many users. Since the PCs were installed, she says that the library membership figures have gone through the roof.

In June 2007, before the PCs were installed, there were 76 new members. In July, the figure had grown to 615 and in August, 433 more people joined the library. The demand for Internet access is so acute that she says they only allow users half hour sessions.

Ernee Abdul Rahman, the supervisor at this library, says that she has been delighted with the response from

users. Ernee completed a diploma in IT at Kolej Teknologi Bestari before taking on this post.

She gets users coming in from miles away on their bicycles just to use the Internet facilities. Other than the usual children and youth, the Dungun library also gets a fair number of adult users who come in to get information on agriculture and farm animals.



Zulhelmi

Ernee and Azmi both notice one thing; the youngsters using the facilities quickly advance to become power users. According to Ernee, “they are using the

USP in a nutshell

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The Universal Service Provision (USP) programme's main objective is to provide collective and individual access to basic telephony and Internet services to underserved areas or groups throughout the country.

The aim is to narrow the gap between the "haves" in urban areas, and the "have-nots" in rural areas, often referred to as the Digital Divide, this imbalance in communications access can have social ramifications if not addressed at the national level.

USP targets are divided into underserved areas and underserved groups within the community. For classification, SKMM defines these as areas where the penetration rate for Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) subscribers in Malaysia is 20% below the national penetration rate or any locality where in the opinion of the SKMM, applications services are not sufficiently available to the community at large.

How it works

The USP programme acts as a mechanism for channelling private sector investment into unprofitable rural areas. The key tenet here is one of "no gain, no loss."

This means that a designated USP service provider incurs no loss, or makes a profit, when implementing this programme. The service provider claims only for expenses incurred, at cost, and the SKMM reimburses them based on a detailed claims template.

How the Fund is maintained

The Universal Service Provision Fund (USP Fund) was established under the provision of Section 204 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998. The Communications & Multimedia (Universal Service Provision) Regulations 2002 (the USP Regulations) stipulate that, among others, contributions from licensees shall be based on these three factors:

- i) The list of designated services;
- ii) Weightage factors; and
- iii) Six per cent of weighted net revenue.

All licensees except Content Applications Service Provider (CASP) licence holders, whose weighted net revenue derived from the designated services exceeds RM2 million in a calendar year (minimum revenue threshold) have to contribute 6% of their weighted net revenue to the USP Fund.

As of 31 December 2006, the balance of the USP Fund stood at RM1.987 billion. This amount is inclusive of the committed cost of RM497 million yet to be paid pending the claims from the designated service providers for rolling out the USP projects.

In 2007, several projects amounting to RM1.3 billion had been lined up for implementation.



Zailatul Hawa

We had the opportunity to observe this with our own eyes at one of the workstations. Eight year old Zailatul Hawa was busy working on a document using a word processing programme and she was expertly maneuvering her way around. This young girl had clearly mastered that particular application, a feat even some adults may have difficulty with. Zailatul's father is a fisherman and she spends most of her free time at the library because her family does not have a PC at home.

Azmi has one request for SKMM, "Please send us more PCs!" She estimates that they need another six PCs to keep up with demand; a heartfelt validation of this USP initiative by SKMM. [.my](http://www.gov.my)

PCs beyond the basic level. I find that they have picked up advanced formatting knowledge and they spend time sprucing up their assignments with graphics and layout work." On a side note, this phenomenon perhaps explains why Terengganu students regularly do well in government exams.

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