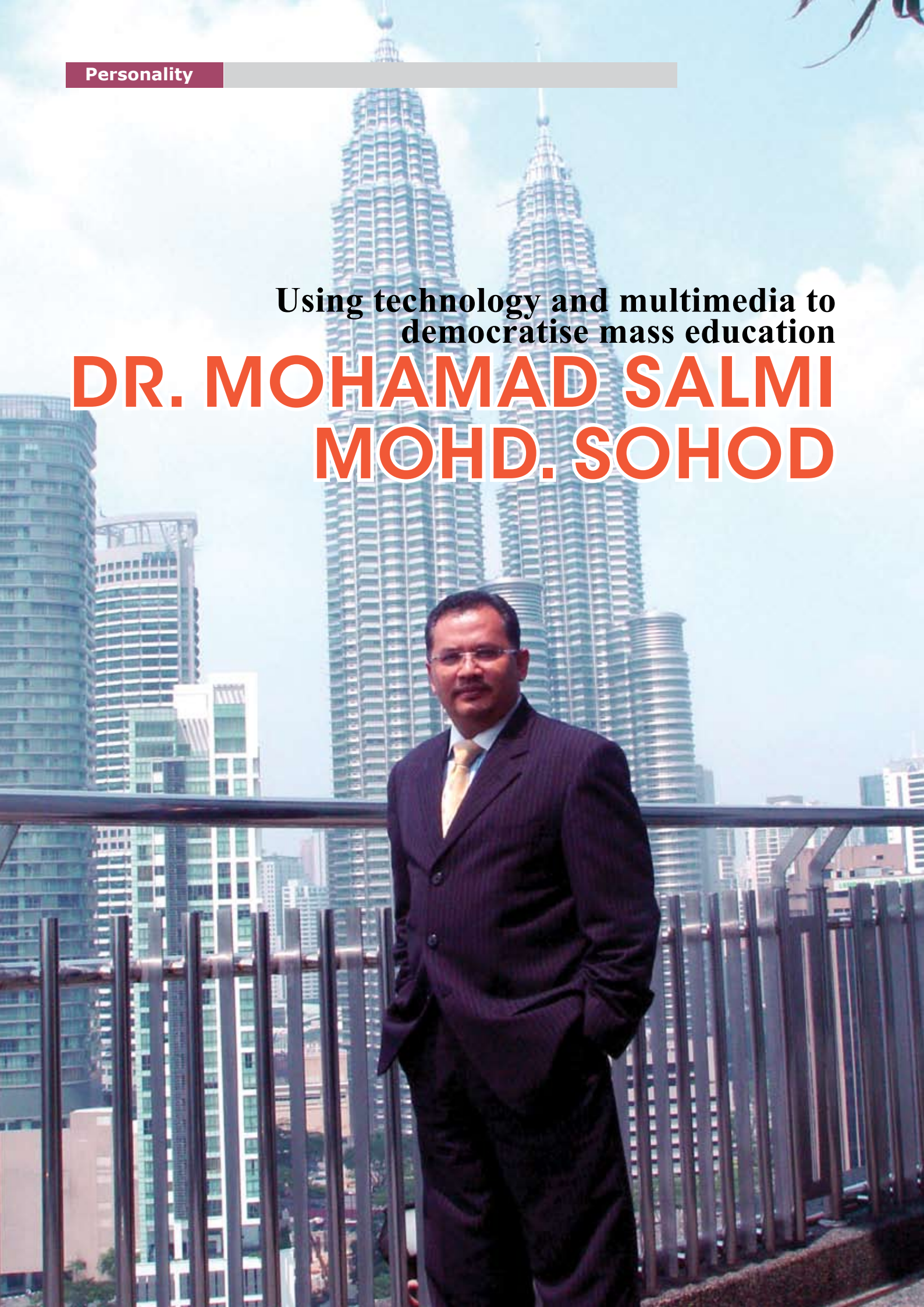


Using technology and multimedia to
democratise mass education

**DR. MOHAMAD SALMI
MOHD. SOHOD**



With both his parents and most of his uncles and aunts serving as teachers, In-Fusion Solutions Managing Director, Dr Mohamad Salmi Mohd. Sohod regards himself as a teacher and firmly believes that educators must move with technology to capitalise on the future, which comprises teaching and knowledge.

He also sees technology as a means to democratise mass education and technology and multimedia as tools to get the young interested in knowledge and education.

“While Malaysians are very open to overseas influences, the cost to study at foreign universities and institutes, especially in the west are too costly for most Malaysians,” said Dr. Salmi.

For example, back in the 1970s the fees for overseas students in an engineering course in the United Kingdom were about 350 pounds for a whole year, the rent for a bedsitter apartment in a place like Salford was about six pounds a week and 35 pounds per week was enough for food, transport, heating, electricity, some entertainment and social activity, all of which added up to about 2,482 pounds (or about RM12,410) per annum.

However, tuition fees for overseas students have risen to 2,000 pounds (about RM10,000) per year and today, the annual fees for a degree course for overseas students at the University of Salford range from 8,600 pounds to 10,700 pounds for the academic year 2009 to 2010.

Private student accommodation costs have risen to a few hundred pounds a month, while the cost of living has risen dramatically since the late seventies. Such fee increases have occurred across other Commonwealth countries as well.

Dr Salmi graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Manufacturing and holds a Master of Manufacturing/Industrial Management from Western Michigan University in the United States in 1984. Upon returning to Malaysia, he was offered a job as an industrial engineer with auto manufacturer Proton but turned that down and instead accepted a post with Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) in 1985, where he held several posts, including as a Lecturer in Management Studies and as a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource & Organisation Development.

While at UUM, Dr Salmi grew beyond his academic responsibilities and progressed into management positions. At the young age of 27, he was the youngest Programme Director at UUM, where he was appointed the Director of its Research and Consultancy Division and subsequently as Director of its Entrepreneurial Development Institute.

Dr Salmi then took a break from his academic duties to pursue a PhD in Management at the University of Bradford

in the United Kingdom, which he completed in 1992 at the young age of 30 and resumed his academic duties at UUM as an Associate Professor in Strategic Management & Entrepreneurship. He was also a member of the Senate and Council of UUM.

After 11 years, he left UUM and joined KUB Malaysia Bhd to establish one of Malaysia’s first private universities, Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR), and in 1997 he became Project Director of Unitar Sdn Bhd a company tasked with the setting up of UNITAR, which was launched on 21 December, 1998.

With that, he was appointed a Professor and at the same time, Deputy President (UNITAR) and also a Member of the Senate. He was also Chief Executive Officer of United Multimedia Sdn Bhd, a KUB subsidiary which manages the electronic-learning (e-learning) infrastructure and systems of UNITAR.

While still there, Dr Salmi extended his service to E-TQM College in Dubai where he was a Professor and Associate Dean of Content Development for three years.

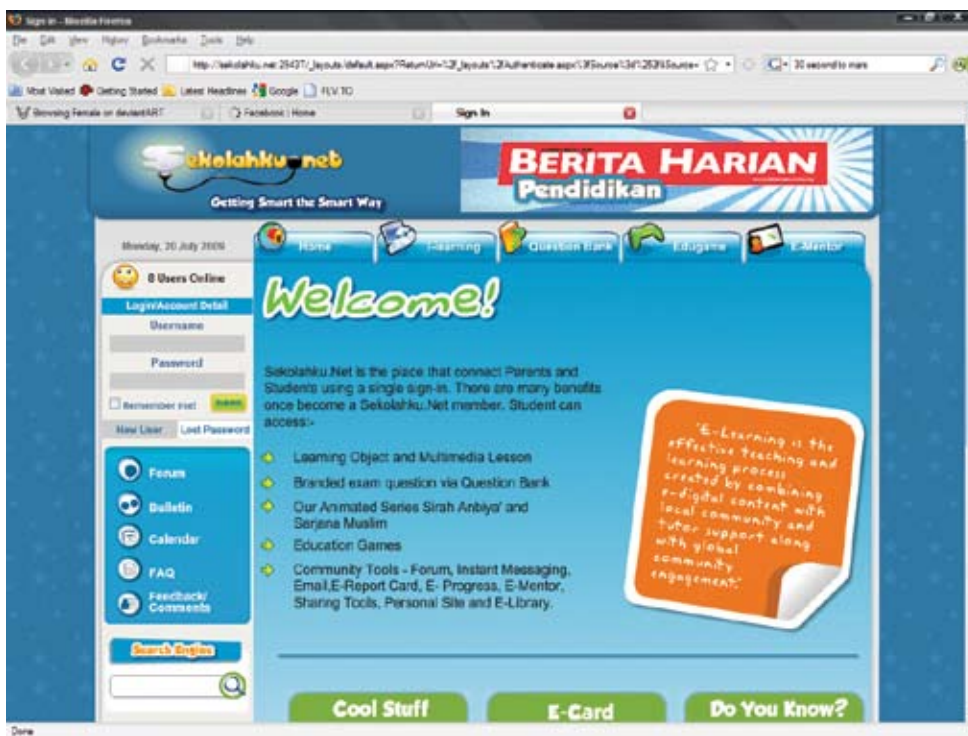
Then in 2003, his passion for education led him to leave UNITAR and found In-Fusion, together with like minded entrepreneurs, with the aim to reshape the Malaysian educational landscape. “We wanted to prove that knowledge-based companies such as ours are viable,” said Dr Salmi.

But there are still three basic challenges to overcome. First is the availability of knowledge-workers with the correct competencies and attitude. Second is the availability of Government policies regarding knowledge-based economics, and third is the company’s ability to face international competition head on, since it cannot be protected unlike the automotive, plantation, agricultural and other such industries.

“In-Fusion focuses in three key areas, namely Education, Electronic-Learning (e-learning) and Edutainment (educational-entertainment),” said Dr. Salmi.

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is one of the areas which tend to be sidelined in Malaysia. The market, Dr Salmi said, is not ready for it since there are not enough Government policies to support or encourage it. Also, degrees obtained through lifelong learning programmes are generally regarded as questionable. Moreover, people in corporate jobs cannot afford to leave to do courses.



 Sekolahku.net portal

“So when I left KUB, I started an online learning programme with the Ministry of Defence,” said Dr Salmi.

Many soldiers join with low qualifications, mostly a Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM), which is equivalent to a Senior Cambridge in the UK or Grade 11 in the US and they retire at the ages of 40 or 45, which is relatively young.

In-Fusion set up small study centres in army camps across the country and provided blended learning, comprising teachers who provide face-to-face classroom lectures, complemented by online training content and reference materials through its K-ForceU.com web portal. The company manages the delivery of degree or diploma programmes from UNITAR in four areas, including Management, Information Technology and Business.

“Armed with a higher qualification helps soldiers find decent jobs when they retire,” said Dr. Salmi. “We are also starting a Masters programme for the army and plan to begin a diploma course in law for the police through E-PoliceAcademy.com.”

At time of writing, In-Fusion was also about to launch a learning community portal Sekolahku.net in collaboration with Microsoft and the portal is intended to replace the practice among many parents to send their children for private tuition after their regular school classes.

In-Fusion planned to charge RM50 monthly subscription for five subjects and the portal will provide students with access to good quality learning content, including learning objects for better understanding of each subject, an online questions bank for exam preparation, an electronic library, access to edutainment, educational games and community tools for interaction between students, parents and teachers.

Edutainment

In-Fusions also has several animated edutainment series which have been broadcasted over Malaysian TV, interactive content and educational games especially aimed at children.

“For example, we did an animated series about the journeys of Ibn Battuta, a Muslim traveller who travelled across more countries than Vasco Da Gama or Marco Polo which teaches history, while our Sirah Anbiyaa series about Muslim Prophets teaches religion and our Wira Merdeka (Independence Heroes) series teaches Malaysian history,” said Dr. Salmi. “We’re now

producing a 2D animated series of Asian Legends which teach values.”

Its educational games such as Math Millionaire teaches mathematics, Dropping Letters teaches spelling and Sepang Boleh teaches everyday life processes, such as to drive a car along the Sepang race track while avoiding obstacles and to collect fuel and answer a question at designated point along the way to the finish line. The games aim to teach students in exploratory ways.

Mobile education

Dr Salmi also believes that mobile phones and PDAs are also tools for education and learning.

“Malaysians tend to be late bloomers. We are very good at grabbing all new kinds of tech gadgets and master all their sophisticated features but we don’t see them as a great tool for learning and education, so we need to change people’s mindset,” he said.

“While at eTQM College in Dubai, we produced learning content accessible on PDA-phones and In-Fusion now plans to launch online learning for members of the Malaysian Institute of Accountants around July and we are looking at mobile learning (m-learning) as a solution for busy executives,” he added.

Snippets of m-learning content, such as small videos, animations, text must be no longer than 20 minutes, since adults cannot learn for too long and passengers in a car, bus or train can learn while on their way to and from work.

For example, it was reported back in the 1980s that a university in the US converted a train coach into a classroom in which it conducted MBA courses during the 90 minute journey.

Let the children choose

Dr Salmi also believes that parents should allow children to choose their discipline of study and type of qualification, as too many Malaysian parents are obsessed with their children obtaining a university degree in medicine, pharmacy, engineering, accountancy and so on.

“There are many para-professional persons who support these professionals and Malaysia must make vocational and

technical careers a respectable option to train for without children being forced to do courses by their parents, as these para-professionals provide more employment opportunities,” he said.

“The skills used to create 3D architectural simulations are no different from those required to create 3D animations or games, though the former is regarded as a professional skill, while the latter vocational,” he added.

In-Fusion subsidiary Go Academy conducts especially tailored courses in Digital Design and is the only centre in the world offering certification in 3D Modelling, Animation and Visual Effects from the United Kingdom’s City & Guilds, the world’s largest vocational certification awarding body. It also offers short courses and part-time programmes.

It also owns the Academy of Digital Animation & Media (ADAM) which provides highly specialised 3D animation and visual effects programmes.

In-Fusion also produces e-learning solutions and content such as the StudentSpace web-based student information management software; LearnSpace learning activity management solution for organisations; ContentSpace for the creation, management and publishing of learning content creation; and its proprietary SPEED (Study, Plan, Execute, Evaluate and Deliver) content development methodology.

Back to the future

Dr Salmi would also like to see children’s old habits of doing practical things, such as making their own bat to play a game of rounders, since it develops the spirit of innovativeness within them, which can be applied in later life.

He also would like to see more training opportunities for para-professionals to upgrade themselves to full professional level with degrees.

“One of the problems, even with PhDs who’ve taken the purely theoretical academic route is that they lack appreciation of the practical aspects of what they are dealing with or advising about, while the technician with just a diploma does, and in fact would even make a better professional after he upgrades himself,” he said.

More holistic education

Being a product largely of the American university education system, Dr. Salmi believes in a more all-rounded education, with emphasis in key disciplines, and that students should not be streamed too early, such as Malaysian students are into Science and Arts streams after their Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) examinations in their ninth year of school, as this leaves them less options if their interest should change later.

“During my course at Western Michigan University, I took 90 credits in engineering and 30 in a choice of various subjects, including political science, history, communications, the history of the Middle East and others, as this makes one more open and provides one with more options,” said Dr. Salmi.

He also believes that Malaysia should look around the world for the best courses in specific disciplines at universities anywhere in the world, since no one university, however prestigious it may be, offers the same standard of qualification for every subject.

“For example, you’d hardly expect one to get a degree in 3D Animation from Harvard, even though it may be a very prestigious university,” said Dr. Salmi.

Besides all the above, Dr. Salmi has held several leading positions in professional and business bodies, including Director of the Malaysia Techno-Entrepreneurs Corporation (MTec), Director of the Malaysian Multimedia Entrepreneurs Corporation (MMEC), Editor of the Journal of Small Business, the Asian Management Journal and the Journal of Business Transformation. He also was Vice-President of the Asian Academy of Management.

He is also Provost and Senate Member of the Cyberjaya University College of Medical Sciences which In-Fusion wholly owns.

Dr Salmi is also regarded as an expert in Strategic Management and Human Capital development, who’s highly sought after by the Government, for which the projects he’s undertaken include Blue Ocean Strategy Macroeconomic research for the Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister’s Office which is still ongoing since 2007.

He also undertook the Higher Education Corporatisation and Total Quality Management in Education projects (TQM/ISO9000), for the Ministry of Education, Malaysia in 1996, as well as the Strategic Planning project for the same ministry the year before.

For the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development, Malaysia, he conducted Training & Consultancy for the Development of Bumiputera Commercial and Industrial Community (BCIC) from 1994 to 1997 and Multimedia Entrepreneurs Training Programmes. He also conducted Corporate Training Programmes for Perwira Affin Bank from 1993 to 1996.


So what’s next?

So what will be next for In-Fusion over the next five years?

“In the next five years, I personally would like to see In-Fusion listed as a knowledge based corporation on Bursa Malaysia (the Malaysian Bourse) and having international offices in India, the Middle East, and around the ASEAN region,” said Dr Salmi. “This will be in line with our growth strategies where the newly developed economies will need the kind of services that we provide - education, e-learning and edutainment.”

He expects the online learning environment to overtake the class learning environment, where people will learn more while on the go, rather than when in one place, hence mobile learning with more simplified learning tools and devices will be more ubiquitous in the next 5 - 10 years from now.

As for new technologies, channels and avenues for learning, Dr Salmi believes that we may be using the TV more than usual as a learning platform but the TV will be mobile and handy. The Internet will always get more friendly and purposeful in years to come, while wireless technologies such as WiFi and WiMAX will make communication more accessible throughout the country and internationally.

“Lifelong learning is going to be the biggest growth area over the next five years, where people will learn new work productivity related skills on-line,” Dr Salmi concluded. 

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