



Five members of the ladies computer class of the Bandar Baharu UCC flanked by UCC manager, Ruzilawati on the left and Assistant Manager, Shahrul Zakaria on the right.

Exemplary Cybercafes

SKMM's Universal Service Provision Communications Centres are showing the positive side of cybercafes. Md Rusli has the story of the Bandar Baharu, Kedah centre.

Rightly or wrongly, cybercafes have a lot of negative perceptions. They're usually associated with dingy environments where students playing truant congregate to waste time and money on Internet gambling, playing negative games and visiting undesirable sites. The negative associations of cybercafes with activities like smoking and gangsterism are so strong that a fair number of parents either completely ban or severely limit their children from visiting cybercafes.

So it is a pleasant surprise then to come across a new kind of cybercafé that is not only safe but is actually passionate about giving its members a positive Internet experience.

Unfortunately, you probably won't find one around your street corner; not unless you happen to live at the far edges of Internet land.

Say hello to USP Communications Centres, more often known simply as UCCs. These cybercafes are not to be found in urban areas because they have been set up under the Universal Service Provision (USP) programme by SKMM.

The USP programme was of course started years back to bring communication services to underserved areas. The first phases of the programme saw communications infrastructures being installed in remote areas.

Villages that had no telephony services had public phones installed. In other areas, the USP programme brought phone lines to all homes in an underserved area. USP projects have also been responsible for providing mobile coverage in areas that service providers have not been able to reach. These infrastructure intensive projects are still continuing; for example a USP funded initiative is bringing mobile coverage to the East-West Highway that links Perak and Kelantan.

But infrastructure needs are rapidly being met and this has led the USP programme to focus on initiatives that involve improving access to digital services among under-privileged segments of the population. One such programme has been the installation of Internet Access PCs in Libraries. The other interesting programme is the UCC project.

The UCC also forms part of the national broadband rollout plan. The UCC project is simple in its concept. Putting together a blend of entrepreneurship and service.

SKMM worked with state governments to identify suitable premises. In the third quarter of 2007, 12 locations were approved. One of them is in Bandar Baharu, Kedah. A visit to this centre reveals just how much USP initiatives are helping to narrow the digital divide in Malaysia.

UCC Bandar Baharu

Bandar Baharu, Kedah is your typical small Malaysian town which lies at the tip where three states, Kedah, Penang and Perak meet. It is separated only by a river from Parit Buntar town which belongs to Perak state. The Penang town of Nibong Tebal is also very close by. Most residents are engaged in farming activities or work in factories nearby.

The arrival of the UCC centre has brought changes to the activities of quite a few people. Factory worker Nor Zuraini who lives in Kampung Teluk Sera, Nibong Tebal is certainly not a typical cybercafe user. She has been travelling half an hour every Sunday for the last one month to attend a computer introduction programme. Her classmates consist of five other ladies, all married and all very fascinated with what they are learning at the UCC centre.

Fellow student, Nurihan who is engaged in some direct selling programmes said that she makes sure she frees up her Sundays to attend the computer class. They spend one and half hours each week and every student has a PC to use. These ladies are taught how to access the Internet and basic word processing.



The ladies computer class in session.

Nurihan says that she feels more empowered since attending this programme. “Some of my neighbours have computers and I felt a bit deprived because we did not have one in the house.” Now she is so enthusiastic that she is making arrangements to buy a second hand PC for the house. “All of us have our own email address and now we are communicating with other people.” There is even better news: most of their husbands are also attending these same computer classes on a different day.

The manager of the UCC is Ruzilawati Mohd Khalib, a bubbly young lady who took a degree in computer science in UiTM Shah Alam. The UCC centre is actually set up by TM Berhad, which was appointed by SKMM for the UCC project. TM along with its business partner, Medan Sedunia Digital hired people like Ruzilawati to run the UCCs and they are given opportunities to run it as a business with the possible incentive of owning the UCC outright in due time.

Ruzi says that she and Shahrul Zakaria, the assistant manager are enjoying their work in the UCC. They started in December 2007 and their first focus was on publicity. They printed and passed out leaflets advertising free computer classes and Internet access at promotional rates. The





UCC Bandar Baharu Manager, Ruzilawati.

response has been overwhelming and these days, people are signing up just by word of mouth alone.

The free computer classes that the ladies are attending are used to expose people to the information and services PCs and what the Internet can offer them. Once they find how useful it is, they are then encouraged to become UCC members. Membership entitles them to special rates and privileges. UCC members pay only RM1 per hour for computer use while non-members are charged RM1.50. They also pay lower charges for printing and other services.

Ruzi is focussed on getting people to use computers in a positive way. The emphasis is on Internet usage. “We introduce e-applications to them, showing how they could get things done without having to physically travel anywhere.” She was very pleased recently when some members came in and booked low cost airline tickets because they had just been offered university places in other parts of the country.

“Previously, these students would have had to go to a travel agent in Penang, now they got the tickets by just coming here.” Other activities that she has introduced to her UCC members include online money transfers and SME related services.

The students who use the UCC facilities are also becoming IT empowered. “Many of them are now printing out their folio covers and using information and graphics sourced from the Internet for their projects. Young people, like any other cybercafé, make up a large portion of the UCC members. Here, however, Ruzi and Shahrul are gentle supervisors who make sure that these youngsters are not visiting undesirable websites or engaging in excessive gaming activities.

The UCC membership is also very reflective of the population. Ruzi is proud that people of every race come and use the UCC facilities. Students Ananthi and Farhana



The UCC Centre is frequented by students of all races.



Classmates Ananthi (*left*) and Farhana (*right*) learning how to use a PC.

Syuhada are classmates at Sekolah Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin. Ananthi's father drives a tractor while Farhana's father is a lorry driver. They have been coming to the UCC two or three times a week usually by motorbike. Both of them have no computers at home and find the UCC facilities very useful.

Ruzi and Shahrul keep the centre running from 9 am to 7 pm every day. Occasionally Shahrul also opens it from 8 pm to 10.30 pm if there is demand or a special request. These two people are very dedicated to meeting the needs of the UCC members. "We make sure that we keep on good terms with everyone and we have no hesitation going the extra distance for them." This is demonstrated literally at times as Shahrul also help out students without transport by picking them up and sending them home by car.

The UCC structure

The Bandar Baharu UCC has 11 computers all networked and connected to the Internet. One PC is used for admin work and 6 computers are used for classes. The other 4 PCs are available for users at hourly rates. A CCTV system ensures that computers are used for positive purposes. The premises are air conditioned and the computers are protected from power surges and blackouts with UPS (uninterruptible power supplies) units. Ruzi says that blackouts are a problem in Bandar Baharu, "We had a lot of blackouts in the initial months but thankfully, things are a bit better now."

According to Ruzi, the money collected from membership fees and PC usage goes towards materials, peripherals and utilities. To really keep it sustainable, they have to engage in

providing IT services and sales. Assistant manager Shahrul is the ace in this area because he handles PC servicing and refurbishing.

The free computer classes have generated a steady income through the sale of second hand and low cost PCs to first time computer users. Shahrul says that most of the people here cannot afford top range new PCs which is why he spends time sourcing out second hand PCs for them. Shahrul also repairs and services computers that people bring in.

Ruzi has plans to expand the range of services being offered. We're looking into getting a photocopying machine as we have people asking for copying services all the time. Space is a problem as the shoplots they are in is rather narrow. "We have put in a request to take up two shoplots and open up the wall in between. Hopefully we can get that approved and really grow this venture." [smy](http://www.smy.com.my)

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