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INNOVATION

Education not serving Thai software

DON SAMBANDARAKSA

An all too regimental education system starting in grade school that discourages innovation is killing Thailand's software industry, according to Professor Peter Haddawy, vice president of the Asian Institute of Technology.

Haddawy came to Thailand in 1997 and in 2000 he joined AIT as chair of the IT steering committee. Some of the recent milestones he has seen in the software industry include the success of Reuters Software and the relocation of Massive Software to Thailand. (Massive was behind the crowd simulation system in *Lord of the Rings* and more recently *King Kong*.)

He also reflects on the high speed of telecommunications infrastructure development here, though he said it remains surprising how hard it is to get Wi-Fi connectivity compared to Vietnam, where today nearly every other roadside cafe has free Wi-Fi.

But there is a lot which has not happened too. It's a story of missed opportunities, he said.

Vietnam today is the world's hottest IT success story, with a software industry that is happening very quickly. Haddawy feels that Vietnam's success is that it has balanced supply and demand in the IT sector. Thailand today has demand, but not supply, and the opposite is true of Pakistan, which has invested a lot in education only for no industry to be there ready to hire the graduates.

The problem, he feels, starts in grade school where children are expected to repeat what is in the book and critical, creative thinking is not encouraged. The school system is discouraging them from expressing themselves.

What a great way to kill a software industry," he said.

The other thing that Thailand sorely lacks is a framework to foster entrepreneurship. Today, AIT is working with its neighbours at Science Park to do just this. "We need to develop the next generation of techno-savvy entrepreneurs by taking people who are good at engineering and teach them how to market them," he said.

Haddawy also criticised the government for focusing too much on huge, monolithic mega-projects that are prone to corruption. "Why not distribute around to help foster small businesses?" he asked.

Speaking about the future, Haddawy said that perhaps it is time to re-think the way we hold the concept of copyright in the digital age. "Copyright applied to print and to tapes, and today we are trying to adopt it to the digital age," he said. "But it is impossible to protect the material as it is simply too easy to copy. Rather than stubbornly sticking to the old model, we should look ahead and to alternative revenue streams.

Google is a prime example of making money off advertisements from free services, but an even better one is MIT's OpenCourseWare free curriculum initiative.

Haddawy explained how OpenCourseWare originally started as a way to sell MIT's eLearning portal. After a while it became clear that the costs involved meant there was no way they could come up with a reasonable revenue model, so rather than sell it, they decided to give it away for free.

When that announcement was made, it was front page news on *The New York Times*. "Now, how much does it cost to buy a front-page ad on the New York Times? Today, 35 percent of those who apply to MIT do, at least in part, because of their free OpenCourseWare," he commented.

"Microsoft's Andrew McBean gave a talk recently on how Microsoft is going from being the biggest software company in the world to the biggest advertising company," he said by means of another example.

Haddawy is also a big proponent of open source, and believes it to be the best way that Thailand can contribute to the direction of the IT industry, rather than simply being a consumer of technology.