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Where we fall short: Lim says one of the challenges for the industry is a lack of talent in big data analytics and AI.

Ongoing programmes: (from left) IBM Malaysia Sdn Bhd storage systems country manager Ku Chuan Cherng, Chee, Ng and Lee looking at some of the projects TAR UC is working on.

CLOSER cooperation between academia and the industry could lower the cost of technology adoption and reduce the barrier of digitalisation for companies.

This, say industry observers, will make it easier for SMEs to improve their processes and get on the digitalisation bandwagon.

"SMEs may not always be at the forefront of technology, that is why they need the help from institutions," says IBM Malaysia Sdn Bhd systems general manager Chee Eng Wei.

Chee went on to explain that by working with educational institutions, small businesses will be able to leverage existing expertise to prototype new technology before investing in its full adoption.

Such is the case for Tunku Abdul Rahman University College (TAR UC) which has struck up a collaboration with IBM to provide SMEs with a platform to develop and test out new applications.

TAR UC president Professor Dr Lee Sze Wei sees this as a way of empowering and enabling small businesses to jumpstart their digital journey.

Despite the government's aggressive push for SMEs to look into Industry 4.0 technologies, Lee notes that a lot of small businesses are still unclear about what Industry 4.0 is and how to go about it.

"We are trying to address this issue for them. SME contribution to the economy is significant and this is the group that needs the most support. It is important for us to continue exploring how we can further support them in terms of technical and human resources," he says.

TAR UC started its collaboration with IBM in 2011 with the set up of a centre of excellence for software technology. The centre eventually expanded to include entrepreneurial support in 2014.

Last year, the collaboration was further expanded when the education institution set up a big data analytics lab to facilitate indus-

Encouraging new technology adoption

Companies should leverage expertise from the education sector to go further

try projects, research activities and postgraduate teaching programmes for Artificial Intelligence (AI), big data analytics, Industry 4.0, agriculture 4.0 and so on.

The lab is also aimed at offering SMEs a platform to test out proof of concepts and AI modelling for their respective smart applications.

Since August 2017, more than 12 SMEs have signed Memorandum of Agreements on Industry 4.0 proof-of-concept projects with TAR UC. Some of these projects have entered into the piloting stage. The initiatives are mainly in the area of smart agriculture, smart manufacturing and the Internet of Things (IoT).

TAR UC academic and research vice president associate professor Dr Ng Swee Chin says it has been sharing its know-how and hardware to help companies digitise and modernise in order to be ready for Industry 4.0.

The university college has invested in IBM's power systems hardware and in its Hadoop Lab setup which would benefit SMEs looking to prototype new technology.

"It's going to be a journey for SMEs. Some are only moving from Industry 1.0 to 1.5. We

will help them look at their processes and improve along the way. We have experts to work on these projects and we will work with them to solve their problems. We welcome more companies. There are many ways to help them digitise whether it be providing solutions, software or platforms.

"We have also derived assessment tools to help them assess their technology and human resource capabilities in terms of the digitisation of their processes," she says.

Ng notes that there is a misconception in the industry, particularly among SMEs, that the process of digitisation is an expensive one.

This, she insists, may not always be true.

TAR UC's platform, for example, can help SMEs with the initial stage of developing and customising solutions, which will enable them to look into costing and returns on investment to make the right business decisions.

The companies that have worked with TAR UC are mostly on project basis.

Ng adds that TAR UC has also been working with Malaysia Productivity Corporation to develop and refine its assessment tools and to provide training for companies to

help them adopt a mindset shift.

Its efforts to work with companies could potentially open up a new area of revenue for the educational institution. However, Lee emphasises that TAR UC is not in it to "do business".

"We are an education institution and we want to play that role to educate. We are here to help companies that are starting on their IR4 journey," he says.

This relationship with the industry is, after all, a win-win for TAR UC, says Lee.

"Our aim is to get our students trained and exposed to solving real problems in the industry," he says.

This will also ensure TAR UC is kept abreast about what is happening in the industry and help its students publish relevant research papers.

However, one of the challenges for the industry when it comes to digital technology is a lack of talent in big data analytics and AI.

In this respect, Faculty of Computing and Information Technology dean Lim Mei Shyan says TAR UC hopes to enhance its infrastructure to provide the right facilities and services to the industry in these areas.