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Malaysia must build excellent research centres and emphasise meritocracy in its quest to establish a knowledge-based economy, said a University of California professor of economics.

Professor Woo Wing Thye said the topics of research should be important to the country and the products commercially useful.

"We should not be studying diet pills but try to find new cures for tropical diseases like malaria," he told reporters at the seminar on *Asian Competitiveness* opened by Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon on Monday.

Penang-born Woo said Malaysia should develop its own technology and not depend on foreign direct investments (FDIs) in view of competition posed by China.

While promoting information and communication technology (ICT), he said Malaysia could not afford to miss out on the biotechnology revolution.

Woo said that to develop new technology and run the local research centres, good workers were needed and meritocracy should play a bigger role.

"Good people respect those whom they think are as good as themselves or better," he said.

Woo said meritocracy-based promotions within the framework of a quota system would encourage top brains to return to work in their home country.

Earlier, Woo presented his paper on *The Fallout from China's WTO Accession: How Should Southeast Asia Respond*, co-written by Warwick J. McKibbin from Australian National University's Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies.

Other speakers were Dr Gao Shi-Ji from China, Dr Hong Yoo Soo from Korea, Dr Peter Brimble from Thailand, Cherry Lyn Rodolfo from the Philippines and Manu Bhas-karan from Singapore.

In his keynote address, Dr Koh said Penang's niche was in ICT and the government would also encourage the building of collaborative research centres.

He urged small and medium-sized industries (SMIs) to create synergy by forming consortiums rather than compete on their own.

Dr Koh said the country, particularly Penang, should expand its synergy

partners and change the formula of China+1 to X+1 – with X representing China, Korea, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand while 1 represents Malaysia or Penang.

The seminar was organised by the Socio-Economic and Environmental Research Institute (Seri). Also present was Seri chairman and state executive councillor Datuk Dr Toh Kin Woon.

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