

PM: Country poised to be region's education centre

20 JUL 1994

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PENANG, Tues. — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says Malaysia is poised to become the region's centre of education and has initiated several approaches towards this end.

"For example, proposals touching on amendments with regard to higher education are being studied to allow for the setting up of branch campuses of reputable foreign universities in the country," Dr Mahathir said at the opening of International College in Bukit Jambul here today.

He added that regulations regarding entry and visa requirements for foreign students were also being simplified, while a National Accreditations Board was being set up to ensure credentials of institutions were internationally accepted and recognised.

"All in all, what Malaysia should be offering is quality education at reduced cost," he said.

Among those present were Chief Minister Dr Koh Tsu Koon, Education Minister Datuk Amar Dr Sulaiman Daud, Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Dr Ibrahim Saad, several Ministers and State Exco members.

In this respect, the setting

up of International College marked a milestone in the history of education in the country.

He hoped the country's push to maintain high standards and ensure quality education would be constantly subscribed to by the college.

The Prime Minister said: "We must be rigorous with regard to standards if we are to maintain the reputation of being providers of quality education. Our credibility must not be undermined."

Dr Mahathir said that if the country was not sufficiently vigilant, some dubious arrangements could be made where 'certificate mills' were set up for quick

profits.

"The behaviour of a few can undermine the credibility of the whole nation, and the whole education industry will be brought into disrepute with subsequent loss to everyone," he said.

He warned that the Government would come down hard on those who compromised standards in the pursuit of quick profits.

The Prime Minister said the Government had plans to build more universities, polytechnics and other training institutions to meet the increasing demand for education.

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Integrated approach the best

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"However, the Government, working on its own, will not be able to meet the demand which we anticipate will increase as we march towards 2020."

Therefore, he said, the role of the private education sector was important and that private education could complement efforts by the public sector in striving to provide education to Malaysian youths and others.

"Given that all sectors are inextricably bound together, the integrated approach perhaps represents the best strategy to meet the challenge," he said.

The concept of Malaysia Incorporated, he said, could be applied to the education system, and that both the public and private sectors must work together to develop an education system which could take the best from both worlds.

For this, he said, it was essential that the private sector understand the aims and objectives of the Education Ministry.

Bound by a shared vision and mission, both sectors could then not only avoid

duplication of efforts and dissipation of energies but could work collaboratively towards a single purpose.

Dr Mahathir said the proliferation of private education institutions in the country could cater not only to local needs but also meet foreign demand.

Since 1990, there has been a 144 per cent rise in the number of foreigners studying in Malaysia. The majority of them are from Asean countries.

In 1990, the Immigration Department issued 1,192 student passes. This rose to 1,526 in 1991 and 2,911 last year.

The number of student passes issued to students from the United States increased from 50 in 1991 to 213 last year.

The numbers of students from Britain increased from 31 in 1991 to 60 last year. Student passes issued to those from Germany increased from six in 1991 to 27 last year, and for those from Japan from 12 in 1991 to 59 last year.

Other foreign students here include those from Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, India, Taiwan, Paki-

stan, Brunei, Australia, Hong Kong, Canada, China, Nigeria, Iran and Italy.

However, he warned that the Government did not advocate the provision of a 'smorgasbord' of courses of study regardless of whether or not they could contribute to the nation's aspirations.

"We have to firmly keep in mind that Vision 2020 seeks to create a society based on science and technology. There is therefore a need to be selective in the courses that are offered by educational institutions."

He said there was too often a temptation to offer popular courses in order to attract students but he pointed out that government-funded institutions were already able to supply more than the country's needs in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

Dr Mahathir suggested that it would be worthwhile for private education institutions to seek areas that had not been explored.

Such areas, he said, should include aeronautics, materials and their properties, production technology, computer-aided design, machining and manufacturing.

"The provision of such courses will go a long way towards enabling Malaysia to carve a niche in the highly competitive education industry. Besides they are relevant to Malaysia's industrialisation programme," he said.

The Prime Minister said the major thrust of educational policy in Malaysia was to prepare young people for jobs in a modern industrial society.

"We require skilled workers, artisans, craftsmen, commercial workers, technicians and skilled managers as the working base of our population. We expect schools, vocational institutes and private education establishments to produce them in sufficient numbers," he said.

Malaysia still required increasing numbers of engineers, doctors, dentists, economists and accountants.

Earlier, Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor, chairman of the college board of governors, said International College shared the Government's vision of making Malaysia a regional centre for education.