

Varsities must be prepared to change, says Dr M

By Farush Khan

KOTA KINABALU, Tues. — Describing education as “a big investment” of the country, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today universities must be prepared to change to produce quality graduates.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia's education system was expanding rapidly, but still not as fast as the country's economic development.

“If Malaysia wants to move forward and increase its level of competitiveness to match that of developed countries, our workforce must be from among those who are well trained and skilled, apart from being educated.”

Dr Mahathir was speaking at the ground-breaking ceremony of the Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) campus in Teluk Likas, near here. The country's ninth university is being built at an estimated cost of RM980 million and is the single biggest project by the Federal Government in Sabah.

Dr Mahathir described the setting up of the campus as the fulfilment of the Barisan Nasional Government's promise made during the last general election.

Stressing the importance of education, he said the ability of a country to explore and continue with the progress and successes in the various fields depended heavily on the ratio of youth in institutions of higher learning.

“To produce quality graduates, local universities must be prepared to make changes, not only to structure and form, but also to the curriculum and teaching of relevant knowledge to face the challenges of the 21st century.”

He said local universities must be brave enough to explore new fields, taking into consideration current needs in the fields of management, industrialisation and technology.

Science and technology-based courses such as automobile engineering, aerospace engineering and shipbuilding, which could strengthen the country's level of competitiveness, must be considered by the universities, he said.

Dr Mahathir said it was time local universities upgraded their co-operation with the private sector to find funds to finance their researches.

He said joint ventures between the private sector and universities should be encouraged and intensified.

He said the Government's move to corporatise universities was to enable them to overcome their financial woes so that they could conduct research and hold more study programmes.

Changes, he said, should also be considered in the methods of teaching and every university academic staff must be prepared to review such methods.

“For instance, the problems faced by Bumiputera students in science and mathematics must be overcome fast.”

Dr Mahathir said drop-

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outs among Bumiputera students in English, science and mathematics should also be given due attention and tackled by all parties concerned.

He said the setback faced by Bumiputeras in these fields would make it difficult for them to compete with others who had already moved far ahead.

"Vision 2020 will be meaningless if the achievement of Bumiputeras in professional subjects such as engineering, medicine, accountancy, management and communications is not on par with the rest," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the methods of imparting knowledge to Bumiputeras must suit their character.

"Orthodox methods may not be suitable and new methods should be explored," he added.

The use of computers and animation, he said, should also be studied to facilitate the assimilation of knowledge by the Bumiputeras.

He described the UMS as a "pillar of hope" for the

Bumiputeras in Sabah and the "symbol of aspiration" for the people in the State to acquire guidance and assistance in developing the State.

With its forest, marine heritage, natural beauty, rich culture of the various of the Bumiputera communities, he said Sabah could become the most ideal place of research.

The Prime Minister reiterated the need for the people not to be content with the achievements made in the various fields thus far.

He said the achievements did not come easy but had been attained through relentless efforts by all parties concerned, including the people, and that this spirit of competition must continue.

Speaking at the function, Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said the campus, to be built on a 363-hectare site in Teluk Sepanggar, Teluk Likas, 10km north of here, in three phases was expected to be completed in 2005.

He said the first phase (estimated to cost RM200,000) of the campus,

facing the South China Sea in the west, was to be ready by 1998.

On the eastern side, the campus faces the Crocker Range and Asia's highest mountain, Mount Kinabalu.

"With the richness of the flora and fauna around it, I can say that this campus will be the country's most attractive yet," he added.

Chief Minister Datuk Mohd Salleh Said said the implementation of the project would help make "an excellent Sabah" that could produce people who could contribute significantly towards the country's economy.

The establishment of UMS was approved in principle by the Federal Government last July, three months after the Barisan Nasional took over Sabah's administration from Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS).

The order for its establishment was issued on Nov 24.

UMS Vice-Chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Abu Hassan Othman, in his speech, said the university began its first academic session in July with three

schools — science and technology, business and economy, and social sciences.

It also has two research units and a knowledge promotion centre which undertakes studies and research programmes.

He said 207 students were now pursuing bachelor's degrees, 19 master's degree and five doctorates.

Another 199 are in the science matriculation course.

"Of these, almost 40 per cent are students from Sabah," he said, adding that the new campus could accommodate 5,000 students by the year 2000.

Abu Hassan thanked the State Government and Yayasan Sabah for allowing UMS to use the Yayasan Sabah's Community College building as its temporary campus.

He said UMS planned to establish a number of excellence centres such as the Institute of Marine Borneo Research which would focus on research of potential marine resources in the Sabah waters, the Institute of Tropical Biology and Conservation.