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Fewer UK bound students seen

Mustapha Kamil; Kamarul Yunus in London

LONDON, Wed: Britain may see a decline in the number of Malaysian students in future as Kuala Lumpur reviews its policy of sending them abroad.

Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said that among other things the recent depreciation of the ringgit against the pound sterling means the cost to be borne by Malaysians for education in Britain has also increased accordingly.

The value of the ringgit has weakened in recent months against some of the world's major currencies due to speculative activities in the forex market.

Answering questions at the "Malaysia-British Partnership: The London Dialogue", Najib said the Government will have to be more selective in the process of sponsoring students abroad, adding that emphasis will be given to choosing fields of study which will provide quality to support the Government's long-term plans.

He also said that apart from the cost factor, the Government is also trying to encourage Malaysians to pursue their further education at home.

Last week Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in tabling the 1998 Budget, had announced that tax relief for parents of children studying overseas will be withdrawn.

Najib said privately-sponsored Malaysian students here will also feel the pinch, and that they and their sponsors will have to dig deeper into their pockets to allow them to continue their education.

He however said that existing Government-sponsored students in Britain will carry on with their education.

The Government, he added, has no choice but to bear the increased education cost for them.

There are now some 20,000 Malaysian students in Britain.

Najib also said that he sees a new mode of collaboration between Britain and Malaysia in the field of education.

In education, the Education Minister said there are still ample opportunities for British institutions of higher learning to enter into twinning arrangements with local institutions in Malaysia.

Najib also outlined the importance that Malaysia attaches to the distance learning concept, an application within the Multimedia Super-Corridor (MSC) project.

He said the country plans to raise to 40 per cent the number of Malaysians with access to tertiary education by the year 2020 from 14 per cent currently.

Distance learning will assist in accelerating the process, he added.

Earlier in his keynote address, Najib stressed that Malaysia will overcome its currency woes with the Government's continued efforts to strengthen the country's economic fundamentals.

He also mentioned that Malaysia's political stability will continue to prevail although there had been certain outside attempts to wreak havoc in recent weeks.

The country and its people are in full support of the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, he added.

Najib also outlined the existing strong trade relations between Britain and Malaysia, noting the record level of trade last year between the two countries last year.

In 1996 Malaysia's exports to UK accounted for some RM7.49 billion while

imports were about RM5.48 billion.

UK's Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Mr Derek Fatchett in responding to Najib's address, said London has no intention of meddling in Malaysia's currency woes.

He added that Malaysia will continue to be an important market for Britain and for its investment plans in South-East Asia.

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