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## Malaysian education in local environment

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ENGLAND Returned. That as the label given to Malaysians who were educated in England before independence. They were a select few: sons of royalty, senior civil servants and Chinese towkays who could afford the expense. Very few of them had won scholarships for academic excellence.

Higher education in the United Kingdom was made necessary because the British did not recognise academic and professional qualifications of other countries.

It was also convenient and practical because future Rulers, civil servants and businessmen acquired knowledge in the way the British administered the country and did business. Most of the Sultans today and the first three Prime Ministers were educated in England.

Malaya was not alone. India's Mahatma Gandhi and Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Pakistan's President Mohamed Ali Jinnah and Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew were all educated in England. Incidentally, like our first three Prime Ministers, they were all trained as lawyers. So was the first Yang di-Pertuan Agong and his son, the present Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

Before independence, India already had several universities long established yet the elite had to go to England to complete their education.

There was, however, no university in Malaya before independence. The only place for higher education other than the UK was in Singapore at Raffles College which awarded a Diploma in Arts, and the King Edward VII Medical School which trained doctors. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a graduate of the school.

In 1939, my grandfather Capt Noor Mohamed Hashim, as a member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council proposed the establishment of the University of Malaya in Singapore. Before the proposal could be implemented, the Pacific War broke out in 1941 and the university was not established in Singapore until 1949 and much later in Kuala Lumpur in 1962.

After independence, a foreign university education is no longer for the privileged few made possible by government scholarships, and study grants and loans by foundations and banks. Today, there are some 50,000 Malaysians studying at overseas universities in the UK, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and several other countries.

A debate is now unfolding on the advantages and disadvantages of acquiring first degrees overseas or locally. It started with the proposal by the Government to make Malaysia the centre for educational excellence and has become more intense with the recent drop in the value of the ringgit. It costs the country RM1.2 billion in foreign exchange annually for our students to be educated abroad.

In most countries, the first degree is obtained at home and only a few go abroad for Masters and doctorates. The advantage of such a practice is that young people go abroad only when they are mature and have exhibited a sufficient level of academic performance to pursue specialised studies. In addition, it will not be a drain on the country's foreign exchange.

On a visit to a university in the US sometime ago, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, the Prime Minister's wife, was shocked to find a large group of Malaysian students there had kept to themselves, spoke Malay all the time and had no interacted with the local people. They might as well

have been in a campus in Shah Alam!

The main reason why there are so many Malaysian students studying abroad for first degrees is because there are not enough places in our universities. Quite a large number though do study locally for foreign degrees at private colleges through twinning programmes. They are neither here nor there. They have missed out on a Malaysian education and have obtained a foreign degree without the benefits of a foreign education.

At present, there are 10 established universities in the country including three new ones. Another two are in the process of being established. These should be enough for the moment to provide the core for university education. Establishing a new university involves a high level of human resource development, setting of academic standards and much else.

To cater for increased student enrolment, branch campuses should be established all over the country by our universities.

Private colleges should switch their twinning programmes with foreign institutions to local universities.

The students will be acquiring a Malaysian education in a Malaysian environment at much lower costs to their parents and the taxpayers.

Nonetheless, students should continue to be sent abroad but not in such large numbers as now to maintain educational and cultural links.

We would then have come a full circle. The England Returned will in future be the Foreign Returned having acquired their academic, professional and specialist qualifications from the best universities in the world.

They will be the new elite, few in number like their predecessors of yore but with the distinction of being elite because they are the best. The cream of the cream.

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