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Soothing the sting

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THE GOVERNMENT plans to corporatise all universities beginning with University Malaya. Some educationalists feel a corporate culture that puts profits above all else has no place in a university. They argue that a university's primary function is to educate and create a thinking society with an intellectual background and personality. Therefore, corporatisation of universities, with the emphasis on profits, would be detrimental to the academic function of these institutions. According to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, corporatisation will prevent a brain drain from universities, enable them to develop a more flexible management system and run their programmes with greater autonomy while remaining accountable to the government. The move to corporatise has made emotional the issue of student fees. The government, on its part, has made clear that eligible students will not be deprived of a university education due to insufficient funds if institutions of higher learning are corporatised, nor would existing students be forced to leave campus for the same reason. In announcing this, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said, 'The government is committed to ensuring that this will not occur'. Under the 1997 Budget, the government has allocated RM1.2 billion for scholarships and loans (with the onus on universities to identify those students needing assistance). In view of the impending corporatisation exercise, a launching grant of RM100 million has been allocated for the Higher Education Fund, a loan scheme to assist needy students given places in local institutions of higher learning. As for colleges, an educationist feels they ought to be accorded tax exemptions similar to pioneer status accorded to industries, in recognition of their role in generating human resources for the nation.

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