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Ease the intellectual journey

THE proposed relaxation of visa requirements for foreigners intending to pursue higher education here is timely. The current stringent rules serve to pull our plan of turning the country into a regional centre of excellence for education in contradictory directions.

Complaints about our rigid immigration procedures are numerous. As pointed out by many private colleges, the regulations have deterred potential students from seeking higher education here. The process is tedious and time-consuming. The uncertainty prevailing in the long wait for visas, which can take as long as several months, have caused candidates to abandon their plans and pursue their education elsewhere. Students from China, for example, are subject to a second interview upon arrival here despite having been interviewed by the Malaysian embassy. They have to abort their education dreams and return home should they fail the second interview - an ordeal which no one would like to go through. The necessity of this second interview is indeed questionable.

The requirement that foreign students should be conversant in English should be reviewed. In our attempts to promote the country as a good place to learn the language, it is fatuous to impose such a criterion. Undoubtedly, some degree of proficiency is needed but it should not be a deterrent factor. Some foreigners are competent in reading, writing and understanding the language but they may not be fully conversant. Surely, the purpose of studying here is also to increase their proficiency in the spoken language.

Indeed, the problem of excessive red tape is hardly confined to the education sector. As in many other cases, bureaucratic bollixes often foil the best of schemes. The demand for a reduction in the red tape is itself an imperative - a fact recognised by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who made the exhortation recently. Our diplomatic missions should be sensitive to our economic aspirations. At this juncture, we need to create an environment conducive to an influx of foreign exchange. We do not mean to deprecate the work of our diplomatic missions or deplore the immigration procedures. But the rigidities contained therein prove to be an impediment to the economic activities of the education sector. The servility to red tape is seen as the impoverishment of spirit in the pursuit of our economic goals.

Still, the education sector should be equally pro-active. Both public and private institutions should establish a non-profit organisation for promotion and recruitment activities overseas. It should be a one-stop service-oriented centre to promote Malaysian education and provide information, counselling, application processing assistance, travel and accommodation arrangements and pre-departure briefings. The volume of foreign students here - around 12,000 now - makes economic sense in setting up the centre.

The entry of bona fide students can be ensured by their placement in bona fide colleges. A visa application is suspect if the candidate seeks admittance to an unrecognised college. But the onus is on the National Accreditation Board to determine and make available the list of accredited colleges at diplomatic missions. With such safeguards, we can provide foreigners with a voyage of knowledge and discovery within our cultural milieu without them being shackled by rigidities.

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