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ITM is now Universiti Teknologi Mara (HL)

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SHAH ALAM, Thurs. - The Prime Minister today spent a pleasant afternoon with some 20,000 students and former students of Institut Teknologi Mara who, from the outset, gave him a warm reception.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, a major figure in campus affairs as Education Minister from 1974 to 1976, had gone for the meeting amid talk of anti-establishment tendencies among sections of the campus community.

A senior Umno Youth leader, Zein Isma Ismail, had complained that he was heckled during a campus debate held at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in June.

Today, Dr Mahathir was greeted by loud applause from students on his arrival at Stadium Malawati.

The Prime Minister wasted little time in cajoling them with some constant themes like the bad experience the country had at the hands of the colonial masters and the importance of academic excellence.

Then, he produced a surprise - the upgrading of ITM to Universiti Teknologi Mara - midway into his speech which was carried live over TV1.

Another round of applause followed and this time the students accorded Dr Mahathir a standing ovation.

He replied: "Thank you for the applause. But don't forget that with the upgrading, there will be added responsibilities. And you will have to work even harder."

ITM Rector Datuk Professor Ahmad Zaidee Laidin in his speech earlier said he was grateful for the large turnout.

"At first, I was worried because there were reports of a few small groups going around inciting the students not to attend this gathering.

"I am grateful to God that the students were not influenced by them," he added.

Also present were Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abu Hassan Omar, several Ministers, Deputy Ministers and corporate figures who were students at the institute.

At a Press conference later, Dr Mahathir was asked how he felt about the reception he had received.

He said: "As I have always said, there is only a small number of students who create problems ... asking that the Universities and University Colleges Act be scrapped and all that.

"Those students are not interested in studying. But this is not fair because the public is paying for their education ... if they don't study, they will lose a lot."

Citing an example, Dr Mahathir said a medical student was recently charged in court for participating in demonstrations.

"It doesn't help anybody ... not himself, not his family, not anybody," he said.

Dr Mahathir also advised the students to work harder and prove that the Malay race was as good as any other.

He said when he went to study medicine in Singapore in 1947, there were only seven Malay students out of the 70 offered the course.

"Out of the seven Malays, only four passed. Just imagine how difficult it was for us then. Therefore, my advice to you is to study harder because it is only through education that we can continue to prosper."

Dr Mahathir said he had experienced difficulties when the country was colonised.

He said he saw British rule, the Japanese rule, the period when the Japanese handed over four States (Kedah, Perlis, Terengganu and Kelantan) to Thailand (then Siam) and when Malaya reverted to British rule.

Asked his views on the Universities and University Colleges Act, Dr Mahathir said he saw no reason why it should be scrapped.

"I don't see how the existence of the Act will be an obstacle to students studying. All I know is that the Act will prevent students from indulging in activities which have nothing to do with their studies."

However, Dr Mahathir said if need be, the Act could be reviewed.

Dr Mahathir also received contributions from several ITM alumni members for the setting up of Yayasan Budiman Unitekma, a resource centre for graduates.

They included Tan Sri Salleh Sulong, Datuk Amin Shah Omar Shah (both RM100,000), Datuk Fasri Samsudin, Datuk Rashid Maidin (both RM50,000), Datuk Mohd Ariffin Yusof (RM25,000), Datuk Yahya Abdul Jalil (RM20,000) and Kamarudin Rahman (RM15,000).

Dr Mahathir also conferred Tokoh Alumni awards on four alumni members. They were Salleh, Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange president Datuk Mohd Salleh Majid, Fasri and AMIM Holdings Sdn Bhd general manager Aishah Ahmad.

Meanwhile, asked when ITM would formally adopt the Universiti Teknologi Mara name, Najib said this would be done after the ITM Act was amended. "That is only a formality. They can start using the name if they wish."

ITM has produced 142,000 graduates since its inception in 1956. Then known as Rural Industrial Development Authority, its first intake was 25 students.

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