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New examination for entry into Islamic varsities

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - The Education Ministry will introduce a post-secondary examination next year called the Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia (STAM) for students seeking to pursue higher education in Islamic universities.

Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said STAM, to be conducted in Arabic, was equivalent to the Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia and was specifically tailored for Islamic universities such as the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt and other universities of the same standard.

"Students take the subjects at State religious secondary schools or sekolah menengah agama rakyat, but the examination will be centralised.

"We will have the first batch of STAM holders in the year 2001," he told reporters after his Ministry's post-Cabinet meeting today. He said 7,000 students would be sitting the first STAM examination, to be held by the Malaysian Examination Council.

Najib said the introduction of STAM was to produce students who were of high calibre, and to ensure only good students entered Al-Azhar University.

"At present, Malaysian students at Al-Azhar are not doing well. The failure rate is high.

"For instance, 55.5 per cent failed their Usuluddin recently, and 35 per cent failed their Syariah Laws," he said, adding that there were currently 3,000 Malaysian students in the university.

On whether there were any political reasons behind the introduction of STAM, Najib said "If there were, Al-Azhar would not have agreed to the exam.

"In fact, it was the university which asked for STAM to be introduced so that the quality of students would be better."

In April 1997, Egyptian Prime Minister Dr Kamal Ahmed El Ganzoury, in a discussion with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, had requested that the examination criteria for the entry of Malaysian students to Al-Azhar be standardised.

Najib said with STAM, the existing 26 examinations held for entrance into Islamic universities which included Sijil Tinggi Ugama and Sijil Tinggi Agama would be abolished.

"These exams are localised and their quality cannot be determined. With a standardised curriculum, the quality of students will be assured."

Najib said the basis of STAM was the Ma'ahad Bu'uth Al-Azhar curriculum, which was already being used at State religious secondary schools.

"Students will be tested in 13 subjects in STAM. They include oral and written tests.

"Oral tests will begin from July next year while written tests will start in November or December next year."

The subjects are Hifz Al-Quran dan Tajwid, Fiqh, Tauhid, Tafsir dan Ulumuhu, Hadith dan Mustolah, Mantiq, Nahu, Sarf, Insyah, Adab dan Nusus, Mutala'ah, `Arud dan Qafiyah, and Balaghah.

Najib said textbooks currently used at religious schools would continue to be utilised.

"However, from next year they will receive free textbooks under the loan scheme from the Malaysian Islamic Development Department."

Najib said those who wanted to sit the examination must have also sat

the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia.

"The fee for the examination is RM300. However, students need only pay RM100 while the rest will be borne by the Government."

The grades conferred, he said, were Mumtaz for Excellent, Jayyid Jiddan for Very Good, Jayyid for Good, and Maqbul for Pass. "Only students who obtained at least a Maqbul will be given certificates."

On school safety, Najib said the ministry planned to set up a central monitoring system linking schools to police stations.

The system, he said, was encouraged by the police and would ensure that they (the police) acted in the fastest possible time should anything untoward occur.

"The police will also be able to monitor schools more easily. The ministry will have to discuss with private firms on the installation of the system."

Najib said the police had been asked to make more frequent patrols around the vicinity of schools.

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