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Kelantan students' Al-Azhar hopes may be dashed

Azran Aziz in Cairo, Egypt

STUDENTS from Kelantan seeking to pursue higher religious education at the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, next year may see their hopes dashed.

This is because the university has so far refused to budge from its decision to only recognise the Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia from next year for admission.

Malaysian Students Department director Wan Bakar Wan Dagang said none of the students from the State were among the pioneer batch of about 7,000 candidates sitting the STAM (Higher Certificate of Religion) introduced this year.

The Pas-led Kelantan Government had made bids to get the university to exempt students from the State from the entry requirement and to date, the efforts have been futile.

Wan Bakar said Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat met with Al-Azhar officers in Cairo recently and requested that students from the State be exempted from the STAM.

"A delegation from the university visited the State about two weeks ago and I was told that one of the issues raised was the entry requirement. An appeal was again made to relax the requirements for Kelantan students," he said.

On both occasions, the requests were turned down.

"To the university officials, they have made it clear that they will stick with the STAM. However, the Kelantan Government has been asked to sort it out with the Federal Government which has entered an agreement with Al-Azhar to only accept STAM holders," he said.

Wan Bakar said Al-Azhar officials were told the State Government would abide by the Malaysian Government's decision.

"They will have no objection if the Malaysian Government decides to waive the requirement (for Kelantan students)," he said after briefing a delegation from Yayasan Pahang led by Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob on the roles and activities of his department.

The delegation was in Cairo to visit students from Pahang.

Wan Bakar said during his meeting with Nik Aziz in Cairo, he had suggested that the State Government write an official request to the Federal Government to have Kelantan students exempted from the requirement next year.

"I do not know whether this has been done. I believe the Education Ministry will give due consideration if there is such a request," he said.

The post-secondary STAM, to be conducted in Arabic, is equivalent to the Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia and specifically tailored for Islamic universities such as the Al-Azhar and other institutions of the same standard.

To be conducted by the Malaysian Examination Council and using the Al-Azhar's Ma'ahad Bu'uth (secondary school) curriculum as its basis, the STAM was introduced to produce students of high calibre and to ensure only good students enter the Al-Azhar University.

At present, Malaysian students at the Al-Azhar are not doing well and the failure rate is high. This had been partly attributed to the poor quality of students entering the university.

It was the university itself which had requested the STAM to be introduced so that the quality of students would be better.

In April 1997, Egyptian Prime Minister Dr Kamal Ahmed El-Ganzoum 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.

With the STAM, the existing 26 examinations held for entrance to Islamic universities which included Sijil Tinggi Ugama and Sijil Tinggi Agama would be abolished.

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