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Crux of issue is lack of motivation

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's disappointment at the poor performance of Malay students in universities, despite all the assistance provided, compelled him to say recently that, perhaps, for one year, university admission should be based on meritocracy (NST, July 28).

Apparently, Malay students who entered university on merit, by and large, did well and steered clear of undesirable activities as can be seen from the number of PhD holders and professionals among Malays.

It is the weaker students, who were admitted to fill the quota and who could not cope with their studies, who resorted to activities detrimental to their academic success. If these students had not been admitted merely to augment the number of Malay admissions, not only will the pass rate be very high, but the delinquency rate will also be extremely low or even zero.

When considering the number of university admissions, it must not be forgotten that the creme de la creme of the Malay students are sent abroad to study, and only the second best gain admission to local universities on merit.

Taking this into account, the performance of these students is good. Those with lower academic qualifications, who enter universities to fill the quota, are the ones who defile the name of the Malay students. They certainly do not deserve a place in our universities.

When Malay students in secondary schools are made aware that they will be admitted to universities only if they have the requisite entrance requirements, they will strive to obtain them.

Having taught young students in teacher training colleges for 26 years where the bulk of the students in the later years of my career were Malays, I can say with conviction that with the right approach they can be motivated to produce excellent results.

Every year I had a few Malay students in the first year who would not hand in their written assignments. So I would tell the class that I would like to see those who had not handed in the assignments to see me individually in my room some time during the day.

After listening to their reasons for not submitting their assignments, I would ask them when they could hand them in. They would then be told to leave their assignments in my room on completion.

The defaulters liked my approach because of the privacy afforded to them despite their indolence. Although there were a few repeat defaulters, they soon mended their ways. All of them expressed their appreciation for my caring attitude as a percentage of course work marks were added to the examination marks in the final tally.

The lackadaisical attitude of the teachers apparently bred the culture of indifference to assignments among the students, and this indifference persisted when they joined institutions of higher learning. It behoves teachers to take a greater personal interest in their charges and not only motivate them, but also develop a culture of diligence in them so that they will be prepared to face competition and meritocracy, and not continue to rely on preferential treatment and privileges.

The Education Ministry could build more schools with fewer classrooms so that the enrolment is manageable and the number of students in each class can be reduced to enable teachers to have close rapport with them and gain their confidence to accept the culture of diligence that is so necessary

to meet challenges.

Parents no doubt have to work in tandem with teachers to achieve this goal.

To highlight the need for challenges to meet meritocracy, I would like to quote something a Malay colleague told me 30 years ago.

According to him, the Chinese are industrious because of the harsh winters in China which compelled them to work diligently in the fields during summer and store the grains for the winter months when nothing could be cultivated.

In Malaya, the Malays did not need to cultivate anything, any time. They could just walk to the back of the house and uproot some tubers growing wildly (tapioca, yam, etc) and collect young leaves (ulam) for a meal. Without a challenge to grow food for survival, the Malays became easy-going. He was no doubt referring to the time of his forefathers.

When there is no challenge, there is no motivation, and when there is no motivation there is no achievement. The endorsement of the Cabinet on the Prime Minister's proposal to implement the meritocracy policy for entry into public universities (NST, Aug 2) should be the challenge to motivate students in schools to get into top gear and enhance their performance at the end of year examinations.

Believe me, Malay students can rise to the occasion once they are awakened from their slumber of complacency.