

08/08/2001

Meritocracy policy promotes achievement orientation and spurs students to excel

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THE Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad should be commended for making the bold decision to implement the meritocracy policy for entry into public universities.

It is primarily viewed as a means of "awakening Malay students from their slumber" just as the Malay newspaper, Al-Imam wanted to awaken the Malays in the early 20th century regarding their social and economic backwardness vis-a-vis the immigrant races.

I fully support the meritocracy policy for numerous reasons. First, it will spur Bumiputera students to exert more effort towards enhancing academic performance.

Based on my interaction with hundreds of Bumiputera students over the last five years, the major cause of their poor academic performance is the lack of achievement-orientation or inner desire to excel.

The lack of achievement-orientation is primarily based upon their perception that they need not strive hard to gain admission into public universities or to earn a living; their interests will be taken care of by the Government.

This lack of achievement-orientation generates a vicious cycle which ultimately results in poor academic performance. Low achievement orientation generally results in low expectations.

Low expectations naturally result in the establishment of mediocre academic goals which consequently lead to reduced effort and mediocre performance.

In short, Malay students have the mental capacity to excel; what's generally lacking is the right mental attitude. The meritocracy policy will help to create the right mindset among Malay students and enable them to face the challenges of an increasingly globalised world.

Second, in today's Information Age, the key factor in ensuring our nation's long-term prosperity is intellectual capital. We need to fully develop and utilise the nation's human resources.

The meritocracy policy will greatly contribute towards this end by injecting a sense of competition among all Malaysian students which will motivate them from within to attain peak performance in the 21st century. As aptly stated by Dr Charles Garfield, "genuine, sustainable high performance begins with an internal decision to excel".

As a long-term measure of upgrading the academic performance of Bumiputera students, the Government should focus on enhancing their level of self-esteem.

Research has shown that self-esteem is a better predictor of academic success than measured intelligence. High self-esteem triggers enthusiasm and optimism.

It motivates students to pursue their goals and to persevere in the face of obstacles. Research also shows that feeling worthless can be depressing.

Depression generally inhibits performance. In the words of Charles E. Kessock, "No amount of motivation is possible until a person's self-esteem is raised!"

Hence, our educational system should sow the seeds of achievement-orientation, positive self-esteem, self-responsibility, self-reliance, and resiliency in students.

Students should be taught and guided in establishing challenging goals; adopting meaningful values; and overcoming negative peer pressure.

Research shows that schools that deliberately nurture self-esteem have produced impressive results in both academic performance and character building of students.