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Ensuring high education standards

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Private educational institutions in Malaysia cannot be absolutely free of government supervision as unregulated freedom could bring the industry and the nation into disrepute, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Stressing that the Government was committed to developing Malaysia as a centre of excellence for education, the Prime Minister said there must be a certain level of competence at all educational institutions with compulsory supervision by the authorities.

"The danger lies in the unscrupulous offering education, which is of low standards, and even merely selling certificates, diplomas and degrees without bothering to conduct courses and to assess the level of knowledge acquired.

"These unscrupulous people will bring disrepute to learning and to the country.

"The Government cannot and will not allow private educational institutions to be absolutely free of Government supervision," he said, adding that in future the Government might impose charges for the certificates accorded to genuine institutions.

Speaking at the official opening of the Open University Malaysia (OUM) in Jalan Tun Ismail here, Dr Mahathir said the National Accreditation Board (LAN) was set up to monitor the private education industry and to ensure that they achieved standards consistent with the qualifications offered.

Also present were Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad and OUM president and chief executive Tan Sri Dr Abdullah Sanusi Ahmad.

"The LAN is necessary even though some of the genuine and competent institutions may be irked by its interference in the running of their institutions, the qualifications offered and the quality of teachers and amenities they have.

"In the end it is for the good of the genuine institutions that LAN ensures standards are maintained for they will be freed of the bad reputation brought about by the fly-by-night operators," Dr Mahathir said.

On a different note, he lauded the setting up of the Open University, which he said would enable Malaysians from all walks of life to pursue tertiary education.

He said with the need for more people to acquire knowledge, part-time education was very important, especially so with the Government's emphasis on the life-long learning programme.

"The conventional universities will not be able to cater to this category of people, but open universities can easily accommodate the irregular hours that part-time students need.

"This way, workers need not be without the opportunity to get better education and qualification while they work," Dr Mahathir said, adding that off-campus learning institutions had a vital role to play in producing workers for the information technology and knowledge-based industries."

Dr Mahathir said the education industry could be further developed into a strong contributor to the economy as the industry here, though not the cheapest, was more competitive than those in many other nations.

"We should exploit this competitiveness in order to develop our education industry, an industry that is regarded as a service industry

that can contribute towards the growth of our economy.

"Merely by reducing the number of our students going abroad, we can already reduce the outflow of foreign exchange and bolster our reserves.

"The Government is therefore encouraging the education industry not merely to provide education at the highest level for Malaysians but also to contribute to the nation's economic well-being."

The OUM is housed in the former Public Service Department Complex in Jalan Tun Ismail and has established 25 learning centres throughout the country.

In addition, it has made English as well as Entrepreneurship and Professional Ethics compulsory subjects.

Established in August 2000 as the country's seventh private university, OUM now has some 7,000 students and leverages on the quality and capabilities of its owners - a consortium of Malaysia's 11 public universities.

Later, at a Press conference after addressing Puteri Umno members at the Putra World Trade Centre, Dr Mahathir said students taking up distance learning courses were as good as full-time university students.

He said studying via distance learning had been made easier with the advent of multimedia like CD-ROM and others.

Expressing the Government's wish to see the majority of Malaysians having university qualifications, he said open universities allowed working people to gain higher education by taking courses tailored to their needs.

On the response to distance learning, the Prime Minister said it was "very good".