

Students have genuine grouses against PTPTN
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My background was formerly from the higher education sector.

In Nov 1, 1997 the National Higher Education Loan Corporation (PTPTN) started giving out loans.

At that point in time, private colleges were starting to bloom, and foreign universities such as Monash University and Nottingham University were also invited to set up their campuses in Malaysia.

The PTPTN was created to be a rolling fund to provide loans to students who could not afford tertiary education, because very few banks those days were willing to provide the loans.

Banks were charging higher interest fees for students who opted for the loans, compared to the PTPTN.

Besides, the cost of private education is higher than that offered by the public sector.

This is understandable, because they are linked with international universities and catering to a generation of students who would have otherwise opted to go overseas.

There was also no government funding to make available teaching aids for these private universities.

I remember the former health minister, Dr Chua Soi Lek, visiting a medical faculty in a private college. He made such a big fuss over it, complaining that the facilities for the newly set-up medical faculty was not on par with the public universities.

In my heart, I asked, "In the first place, how much has the government provided in soft loans to these private colleges?" Chua, of course, never helped to fight for government funding to boost the private education sector.

As I see it now, with the exception of certain colleges, the private education sector has in fact met the aspirations of the young people of Malaysia.

Because of the PTPTN, many students have been able to pursue their education. Otherwise, they would not have been able to continue their education overseas, or even locally in the public universities due to the quota system.

My question therefore, is why is the PTPTN now the subject of ridicule?

The more I think about it, the more I see the reasons for the students to protest.

When I reflect over the current development where students and graduates are now protesting against the PTPTN, I think their grouses do not only lie with the faults of the PTPTN.

I see it as the students' failure to communicate their grouses effectively. I will summarise for them in a few points, as I see it.

* The standard of public universities has indeed dropped so low over the years that parents are reluctant these days to send their kids to pursue their degrees in any of the public universities. They would rather than send their children to Singapore, than to place them in local public universities.

* Because of this vacuum created in public tertiary education, the private education sector has indeed seen tremendous growth over the years. Some of these colleges continue to expand and make tonnes of money, while others have consolidated their positions and set up foundations to manage the institutions

for perpetuity's sake. This is where profits are being pumped back into the institutions.

* The fact that the younger generation is left to fend for themselves is what I believe the young people are sore about with the BN government. The burden has now been now shifted from the parents; it is the children who have to pay the loan. Upon getting a job, the first loan that they have to service is the PTPTN loan! Don't you think this is scary for the young ones?

* An average fresh graduate in the job market will have three big loans hanging around their necks: (a) bank loan for a car (b) bank loan for a house or apartment to set up a family (c) the PTPTN loan, which is not even tax deductible. Besides, their salaries are not any better than their counterparts in Singapore.

* While they are suffering, we are watching how taxpayers' money is going into a black hole. Just a good example, we do not see the government making serious efforts to recover the RM250 million from the failed project owned by the family of former minister Shahrizat Jalil.

There's also Nedim Nazri, son of the minister in the Prime Minister's Department, who has many wondering how he can afford the expensive sports car he has been seen driving around.

And what about former Malaysia Airlines chairperson Tajuddin Ramli's huge debt that was written off by the government?

I see much of what's happening today has its roots to the era of former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad. He created a culture that is hard to unwind.

Even the PTPTN chief has failed to see the young people's viewpoint, thinking that the PTPTN has indeed done a great favour for the nation, when it could have been better for the government to spend taxpayers' money on human capital development.

A good quality education is a sound investment in the future of our country. If we cannot even invest in the education of our younger Malaysians, where would we be heading as a nation?

As PKR strategist Rafizi Ramli had said it only takes an additional RM2 billion from Petronas money to invest in the human capital development of young Malaysians.

Therefore, young Malaysians, I am with you.

