

PSM: Free higher education a must
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Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) wants the government to provide free higher education in Malaysia, as the cost of private education is a heavy financial burden for the majority of Malaysian students.

Party Deputy Secretary-General Rani Rasiah said that education is something that the government is duty bound to provide, just like healthcare and basic amenities.

"It should be the overriding priority of government to invest in and make available quality education for free. This is in the best interests of the nation.

"The role of providing such education can never be replaced by the private sector whose overriding motive is profit."

She added that students who had taken out loans from the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (NHEFC) were caught in a debt trap that financially drained them. This could explain its RM1 billion in outstanding loans.

She quoted an example of how a physiotherapist would have to take a loan of RM60,000 to complete his studies. This would take at least 15 years to settle. And should he decide to have a family or had to support aged parents, it would even be harder.

Hefty debt

On the other end of the scale, a doctor from a private medical university would begin his working life with a hefty debt of RM500,000.

The Higher Education Ministry is trying to review the procedures of the NHEFC to ensure that only needy students benefit.

However according to Rani, the move is not to help the poor students, but to arrest the government bill for private education - which is expected to shoot up to RM5 billion by 2013.

She said that what is needed now is not a review of the NHEFC loan terms, but rather a total revamp of the higher education system which has in great part, been contracted out to the private sector.

In the last sitting of parliament, she claimed that two local private colleges were turning out substandard graduates whom hospitals are reluctant to employ.

"The reality of private education is that standards have been sacrificed in the fierce competition for the NHEFC loans, the new cash cow for the well-connected companies operating colleges and universities," she said.