

High time education is re-nationalised
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The PSM views the government's current concern over the allocation of the Higher Education Loans Fund (PTPTN) as a piecemeal critique of a very wrong policy, that of privatised tertiary education.

The higher education minister has been quoted as saying that the fund terms of the PTPTN would be reviewed to make sure that only needy students would benefit from it. This is not because the government has had a sudden change of heart favouring the poor.

Rather - in its typical 'cart before the horse' style of doing business - it has discovered that PTPTN borrowers have defaulted to the tune of RM1 billion and also that if not reviewed , the government bill for private education will shoot up to RM5 billion by 2013.

What is needed is not a review of the PTPTN loan terms but a total revamp of the higher education system which has in great part been contracted out to private business people.

The reality of private education is that it has churned out more private education businesses than an educated population. Standards have been sacrificed - entry qualifications, teaching competency, practical training, accommodation - in the fierce competition for the easy PTPTN loans, the new cash cow for the well-connected companies operating colleges and universities.

The last sitting of Parliament singled out two well-know colleges as among the worst offenders, turning out substandard graduates whom hospitals are reluctant to employ.

Quality aside, private education places a heavy burden of debt on the shoulders of young graduates starting out life fresh while determining the options they would have to take in life in order to survive. Someone trained to be a physiotherapist for example, starts out working life with an outstanding loan of as much as RM60,000.

It will take her at least 15 years to clear this debt, adding to the financial burden of raising a family and supporting old folks.

At the other end of the scale, a doctor from a private medical university begins working life with a hefty debt of RM500,000. The future course of action is cut out for her – she has to earn as much as possible, as fast as possible to settle the loan and move on. Who is to be blamed if our young graduates seem individualistic, money-minded and uncaring?

The PSM holds the view that education is a public service that the government of the day is duty bound to provide just like healthcare and the basic amenities. It should be the overriding priority of government to invest in and make available quality education to the young in the best interests of the nation.

Young adults the result of a free quality education will be much more inclined to use their skills and knowledge for the benefit of the majority

The role of providing such education can never be replaced by the private sector whose overriding motive is profits by way of cutting costs

The government should take a leaf out of the progress achieved in education in countries like Venezuela where genuine initiatives are being taken to ensure the educational needs of

the population are met. Education is free (with meals thrown in as well) and flexible enough in terms of time and space to make sure every citizen can participate.

Education cannot be treated as just another commodity to be traded at the market place by institutions seeking to make a fast buck. The messy situation of tertiary education in the country is yet another example which confirms that certain services and functions should never be privatised. It is high time education is re-nationalised!

The writer is deputy secretary-general, Parti Sosialia Malaysia.

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