

# What foreign students want

BEING harassed and imprisoned are not experiences to relish, especially in a foreign land where everyone and everything is alien and unfamiliar.

But this is apparently what some foreign students have gone through in this country. Needless to say, such an ordeal could make them regret choosing Malaysia for their higher education.

Choo Ka Loon's company has helped foreign students secure off-campus accommodation within Petaling Jaya for almost a decade. He has seen students from many countries come, graduate and go.

"They sometimes tell me their problems. Some face discrimination, especially the Africans. Those who try to find their own accommodation say house owners are reluctant to rent to them. Some told me they were robbed when they went to town on their own. Others reported being harassed by Rela officers," says Choo.

Experts say that Malaysia's ambition to double its international student intake to 100,000 by 2010 is not entirely unrealistic. However, if it is to have a fighting chance of coming close to that figure, several long outstanding issues need to be resolved.

National Association of Private Educational Institutions (Napei) president Elajsolan Mohan says foreign student visas is one of them.

Foreign students, after obtaining approval from the Higher Education Ministry, need to surrender their passports to the Immigration Department for their student visas.

The process takes about two weeks, says Elajsolan: "This is a major inconvenience. They do not have their passports for those two weeks and we have received reports of students being harassed by Rela officers and hauled up by the police as a result. Some have been locked up. What kind of first impression will they have of our country?"

Students from Singapore enrolled in Johor colleges cannot travel home when their student visas are pending because their passports are being held by Immigration.

Another obstacle is the need for college representatives to meet students at the airport.

"If there are no officials to get them, the students will not be allowed to leave the airport. Colleges can arrange for a representative to meet students as a hospitable gesture but it should not be made compulsory," says Elajsolan.

The association has asked the government to allow foreign students to obtain their visas before arriving in Malaysia but there has been no response.

"At one time, student cards were issued to foreign students as a form of identification but for some reason, this is no longer the practice," he says.

Elajsolan thinks it is gravely unfair that things are made difficult

The Higher Education Ministry is renewing its push to attract 100,000 foreign students to local universities and colleges by 2010. But several longstanding issues need to be resolved first, writes CHOK SUAT LING

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Malaysia must create a welcoming environment to ensure that foreign students feel at home here.

for foreign students just because some abused their visas in the past to work in the country.

One incentive for foreign students would be to allow them to work for a year in Malaysia after graduation.

"This is already allowed in many developed countries. At present, we only allow students to work up to 20 hours a week (while studying)," notes Elajsolan.

Some students also claim the accommodation provided by educational institutions is far from satisfactory.

"Many of us studying at different colleges here have experienced this," says Muna Vandy, an African student pursuing a degree in accountancy and finance at a private university college in Kuala Lumpur.

"We are not expecting hotel suites but it is not fair to mislead us. Colleges here put beautiful pictures of plush apartments in their brochures and when we come here we see something totally different," he says.

For example, some hostels are not properly maintained and many students are crammed into one unit. Even married students are forced to share a unit with others. That's why many of them choose to

find their own place to stay.

"Thankfully, they do not mislead us about the courses, college facilities and lecturers," Vandy adds.

Security is also an issue. Vandy says a few of his friends have been robbed. "Some have had their bags snatched and their passports stolen when all they wanted to do was take a walk around the city."

Even hailing taxis is a problem, he says. "Taxi drivers do not stop for us. It appears that some Malaysians have not fully accepted our presence."

Vandy chose Malaysia as his study destination based on a friend's recommendation. "If all these problems are addressed, I would strongly encourage other students to come here. The twinning programmes available here allow us to get a British degree, for example, at a much lower cost."

A director of a private college in Petaling Jaya says Malaysia is losing students to Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia.

Singapore, for example, has attracted many household-name universities to set up campus on its shores, including University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, the Wharton School of the

University of Pennsylvania, and the prestigious Insead Business School. They offer much sought-after exposure and link-ups to world-class companies both in the republic and in Europe.

And fewer students are coming from China to Malaysia. Their numbers dropped from 10,230 in 2003 to 9,075 the following year.

"Renowned universities and colleges from Britain, the United States and Australia have opened up branch campuses in China so there is really no need for their students to come here any more."

But he says Malaysia still has a slight edge over Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia: "The cost of living in Singapore is higher, and Indonesia and Thailand are non-English speaking countries. However, it will not be long before they surpass us."

That is why he urges the Higher Education Minister to ensure that policies are properly and speedily executed.

"Sometimes we hear certain announcements and rush to the ministry to seek clarification but are told by the officers that there is no such thing."

National Higher Education Coun-

cil member Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam says nothing has been done so far about the recommendation for smaller private colleges to merge.

These small colleges, many of which are operating in shophouses, are struggling.

Navaratnam points out that there are some 550 of them, mostly Bumiputera-owned, and they lack government support.

"If the government wants Malaysia to be a centre of educational excellence in the region, it has to regard private education as a vital growth sector complementary to, and not competing with, public institutions."

For Malaysia to attract more foreign students, it also needs to be able to attract the best brains to join the teaching staff.

Postgraduate studies in Malaysian universities are a popular choice with foreign students, but recruiting top-notch researchers is turning out to be difficult. Overcoming all these challenges will be crucial if Malaysia is to regain its lustre in the regional higher education sector.

■ sling@nst.com.my