

**PKR pitches 5-point framework to replace PTPTN**  
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 21 — PKR pitched today a five-point framework for a proposed free education policy to replace a hotly debated government varsity loan scheme criticised for saddling fresh graduates with huge debts.

Key in PKR's proposed living cost allowances and loans is its interest-free element.

The opposition party's strategic director Rafizi Ramli (picture) said irresponsible parties had been "twisting" PKR's proposal, claiming the idea would "destroy" the existing National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) loan scheme that provided young Malaysians the best chances of being gainfully employed.

Among the five suggestions mooted by PKR is the set up of specific technical universities, which it said would boost higher learning chances for everyone.

"This is important to balance the number of offers in public institutes compared to private institutes and therefore prevent future dependence on paid higher education," he said in a statement today.

The PKR man pledged that a Pakatan Rakyat (PR) federal government would fully bear the tuition fees at public institutes and provide living cost allowances for qualified students based on their academic achievements and socio-economic backgrounds and family burden.

He added that those from high-income families can opt to pay school fees on their own but can still qualify for a loan from a special fund to be set up for living costs allowance and private education.

"Those without space in public institutes can apply to borrow from the same fund, which will cover their living costs at a fixed rate, taking into account subsidised fees by the government based on their courses," he said.

Lastly, no interest will be charged on the living costs loans taken by the students.

He said the PR bloc would carry out the five-point framework when it takes over Putrajaya.

"This clearly rebuts the argument that Malay/Bumiputera students will lose out if a free education policy is implemented as they cannot support themselves," he argued, in hopes of winning over Malays in their 20s, who make up one-sixth of the voting population.

"On the contrary, a free education policy will enlarge access to free higher education for more Malaysians of all races. At the same time, it will change the existing model of support for higher education that has proven to oppress the rakyat," he said.

The 34-year old estimated an extra RM3 billion annual budget for its proposed scheme.

"I believe abolishing highway toll concessions as promised in the Buku Jingga will save as much as RM5 billion a year, because this is the compensation paid by the Barisan Nasional to the concessionaires every year.

"This money is more than enough to bear the additional allowance of RM3 billion needed to provide for free education," he said.

PKR has insisted that the government can cover the country's education bill with oil profits, and by reducing corruption and plugging leakages in the administration.

Opposition leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has led the line in calling for the end of PTPTN, which critics say has saddled many fresh graduates with heavy debt, even before they are gainfully employed.

However, its PR partner PAS has said PTPTN cannot be abolished without having a proper replacement process in place, suggesting that PKR's proposals may not have been fully agreed upon.

PAS president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang said that stated process has to be fair to all Malaysians, and that Islam stressed that privileged citizens had a duty to aid the less fortunate.

"That is why PTPTN cannot simply be abolished just like that, there has to be a process. A fair process which is not burdensome to the poor and one where the more privileged must bear responsibility," he was quoted by Sinar Harian as saying today.

The Marang MP cited Islamic scholar Ibnu Khaldun, saying that education is a form of industry whereby it generates productive, educated citizens who in turn help boost a country's economy.

The problem, said Hadi was the Barisan Nasional (BN) government's spendthrift ways and misappropriation of federal funds.

"Give it (Putrajaya) to us (to rule) we will know what to do. Under the Islamic concept, the poor will not be left behind," said the PAS president.

Hadi's remarks come amid a vigorous campaign by other Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition partners in promoting free education and pushing for the PTPTN to be abolished.

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