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Educational Access and Opportunities in Higher Education for Socio-Economic Restructuring: The Malaysia Experience

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Abstract:- Since Independence, the National Development Policy has not only taken the national economy into consideration but also many other aspects. The New Economic Policy for example, is a policy that encompassed the political and the social dimensions and also the consideration of a balanced society. The National Development Policy which is based on Vision 2020 envisions Malaysia to be an advanced country from a comprehensive perspective that covers all aspects of life, not only the economic aspect, but also the political, social, psychological, spiritual and cultural aspects. One of the most important social institutions which could help in maintaining the balance is education, and one of the most important educational institution that has been playing this role is the University of Technology MARA. Since its establishment under the name of RIDA College in 1957, then changed to MARA College in 1965 and subsequently to MARA Institute of Technology in 1967 and finally to its present status as University Technology of MARA (UiTM) in 2001, the institution has borne the specific goal of raising the educational standards of the bumiputera (literally “son of the soil”, legally the indigenous). Its existence has a direct bearing to the function of maintaining the political and socio-economic equilibrium of the nation. This is evident from various aspects such as education, economy, socio-politics, rural policy and the process of poverty eradication.

Key-Words:- education, economy, socio-politics, rural policy and the process of poverty eradication

1 INTRODUCTION

Since Independence, the National Development Policy has not only taken the national economy into consideration but also many other aspects. The New Economic Policy for example, is a policy that encompassed the political and the social dimensions and also the consideration of a balanced society. The National Development Policy which is based on Vision 2020 envisions Malaysia to be an advanced country from a comprehensive perspective that covers all aspects of life, not only the economic aspect, but also the political, social, psychological, spiritual and cultural aspects [1].

One of the most important social institutions which could help in maintaining the balance is education, and one of the most important educational institution that has been

2 AFFIRMATIVE ACTIONS THROUGH EDUCATION

In some countries, its constitution has made special provisions for various groups living in it, such that the one that has been marginalized or discriminated would be assisted to succeed economically, socially or culturally. This responsibility lies on the shoulder of the government of the nation to narrow, if not to eliminate the gap between the various groups in the society. Actions or policies that are enacted in favour of the disadvantaged group are known as affirmative actions or reverse discrimination. The philosophy underlying affirmative action is the notion that only the government is capable of promoting the social and economic welfare of those who have been marginalized. Affirmative actions in Malaysia took many different forms and approaches. First, it takes the form of special privileges to the group who has political dominance but is economically backward. Second, it preserves the rights of the indigenous including preserving the rights of the indigenous community in Sabah and Sarawak. Finally, special privileges given to regions that are considered less developed especially in Sabah and Sarawak in comparison to other states in Peninsula Malaysia.

The Special Malay Rights stated in Article 153 of the Constitution of the Federation refer to the rights of the Malays (including Bumiputera in Sabah and Sarawak). In the process of preserving these Rights as stated in Article 153, the King or the Yang di Pertuan Agung is given
certain provisions to ensure its implementation such as provisions for

1. position in the civil service
2. scholarship, education and training or facilities such as provided by the Federal Government.
3. permit or license related to trade or business and places for the Malays and Bumiputera in Sabah and Sarawak in terms of higher education [2].

Affirmative action policy is reflected in the role of UiTM in specific contexts as follows:

(a) A mechanism for elimination of stereotypes of race and occupation through training in education.
(b) A mechanism for delivering compensation for a historical debt whereby the bumiputera have been discriminated and marginalized in education because of the colonial policy of providing education only in the urban areas and also to the aristocrats, thus, leaving them far behind.
(c) Improve the quality of education of the Malays and other bumiputera, especially those who stay in the rural areas, who had been left behind in the economic, educational and social aspects.
(d) Using education as a vehicle for upward social mobility.

It is true that the bumiputera policy was implemented rigorously only after the New Economic Policy, but the seed for defending this policy had already existed during the colonial period. It started when the British tried to implement the Malay Union in which the entity of Malay states would change to become a Malay entity. The opposition led to the British abandoned the Malay Union and replaced it with the Persekutuan Tanah Melayu in which this Persekutuan Tanah Melayu reinstated Malay rights and privileges.

The Malay nationalists were not happy with the poor and slow development of the Malays especially after Independence. The Malay elites had made several attempts to improve the economic conditions of their lots. Taking over the running of RIDA (Rural Industrial Development Authority) was the best example of an attempt to improve the Malay condition. The objective of RIDA in its earlier phase was to help the rural folks by providing capital and training skills to Malay entrepreneurs so that they will participate in business and trade. However, RIDA was only successful in helping the Malays become better farmers. Although this provided greater security than that of their parents’ era, it definitely did not fulfill the aspiration of the nationalists who desired that the Malays succeed in all aspects of life especially in areas that they have failed to make inroad. But RIDA was the launching pad for the improvement of Malay conditions as shall be seen in subsequent sections.

3 HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF UiTM

It has been documented historically that UiTM as an educational institution was the brain child of the early Malay leaders in particular, Tun Abdul Razak, the second Prime Minister of Malaysia. UiTM was born at the same time as the formulation of the national mission of that era, which focused on efforts to improve the socio-economic status of the bumiputera. It had a humble beginning as a training centre known as RIDA Training Centre (Dewan Latihan RIDA) in 1956, then was elevated to Maktab MARA in 1965 and in 1967 it was further upgraded into the MARA Institute of Teknology. Finally, its status was raised to that of a university on 26th August 1999. UiTM continues to grow as the nation aspiration to develop bumiputera, to become a catalyst and to use all the resources available to produce and multiply the number of skilled bumiputera in all fields.

4 THE FIRST PHASE: RIDA TRAINING CENTRE (1956-1965)

Dewan Latihan RIDA or RIDA Training Centre was set up as a consequence of a visit made by Dato’ Onn Jaafar and Tun Abdul Razak to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to observe its national development programme in 1951. Following that trip, a working report of the visit was submitted together with information on the establishment of RIDA and its objective which was to develop and improve the economic status of the rural society. The educational trip to Ceylon led to the establishment of two major centres, namely the Taman Asuhan RIDA (in Kuala Lumpur) dan Dewan Latihan RIDA (in Petaling Jaya) under the Ministry of Rural Development and Industry which was then headed by Tun Abdul Razak. This Training Centre was the first step in the historical journey of the present day UiTM.

The Dewan Latihan RIDA was established on November 1956 at Jalan Othman, Petaling Jaya and was opened to the public on 14th February 1957. Since its establishment, the Dewan has played a significant role as a training centre, offering preparatory courses which are British-centred and with an English language orientation to the rural teenagers. A variety of courses were offered by the Dewan including professional courses such as Japanese language acquisition. Some of these courses were offered by international bodies such as the London Chamber of Commerce, the Australian Chartered Secretaryship, the Australian Society of Accounts and the British Institute of Management. Dewan Latihan RIDA was a trailblazer and created history when it successfully produced 50 graduates in its first convocation ceremony in 1964, promising more contribution to the development of the Bumiputra. The diploma was presented by Tun Abdul Razak himself.

5 THE SECOND PHASE: MAKTAB MARA (1965-1967)

Dewan Latihan RIDA was transformed into Maktab MARA in June 1965. The change in name is related to
the role and responsibility of RIDA itself. Consistent with the government aspiration to inject a new spirit and role for RIDA, the Maktab was placed under MARA or Majlis Amanah Rakyat (Public Trust Council). In fact it became the most important unit in the MARA Training Division. The change in name is also indicative that this body was no longer under RIDA. In 1965 the Malay political parties and non-government organizations organized a Malay Congress to seek a consensus on how to increase Bumiputera participation in the professional fields. The Congress came up with some targets in the various professional fields for bumiputera to reach (Table 1).

Table 1 : The Malay Congress targets for bumiputera participation in various professional fields 1965

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architect</td>
<td>470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveyor</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,290</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although it is not known to what extent the strategy laid by the Congress was implemented by Maktab MARA but in practice, this Maktab became the institution targeted to help achieve the goal of the Congress. This was evident from the increase in the number of professional courses offered in the Maktab as a result of the Congress.

Maktab MARA began to offer its own Diploma in Business Studies in 1966 which was recognized internationally by Ealing Technical College of London which became the external examiners, as a result of the abolition of the distance external examination conducted by the British Institute of Management. However English-oriented courses continued to be offered and in fact the number of such courses increased including those offered by international bodies such as Pitman Exam Institute, Association of Certified and Corporate Accounts (ACCA), Corporation of Certified Secretaries, Institute of Statistician, Institute of Actuaries, Ealing Technical College, Institute of Transport, Purchasing Officers Association, Institute of Marketing, Institute of Credit Management and LLB. By the end of the 1960s the number of programmes increased from 19 to 40 and the number of schools increase to eight to facilitate the administration of the Maktab.

6 THE THIRD PHASE - MARA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (1967 - 1999)

The third phase which coincided with the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) which was enacted in 1970 as a result of the May 13th racial crisis, was the most dynamic phase in the development of this bumiputera institution. From a campus operating in Petaling Jaya, the MARA Institute of Technology (ITM) expanded to more campuses throughout the whole nation in line with the strategy of the NEP to increase educational opportunity and improve the socio-economic status of the bumiputera. This development was consistent with the aspiration of Tun Abdul Razak, the Prime Minister who laid the foundation stone for ITM on 14th October 1967. In his speech he reiterated:

On this piece of 100 acre land which will increase to 300 acre in 1969, MARA will pour all its energy, ideas and bear the trust given to it to develop and build a society of Bumiputera who are educated, knowledgeable and engulfed in a new way of thinking as the correct step to advance themselves. This will be the focus of all efforts and hopes to multiply the bumiputera human resources who are trained in the sciences and technology and various kinds of very important professions which have to be mastered if the bumiputera seriously desire to create growth, strength and advancement in the fields of commerce and entrepreneurship, social sciences and economy in this country (Ibrahim Abu Shah : Modal Insan Melayu).

After the new status as an Institute, 11 new programmes were added and the student enrolment increased to 7,700 backed by 601 academic staff by 1976. Its growth in the ten-year period between 1976 to 1986, was very vigorous with 93 programmes of studies, a student population of 22,049 and a force of 1,540 academic staff. During this period, ITM has expanded throughout the country with four branch campuses in Perlis, Trengganu, Sabah dan Sarawak [3].

7 THE FOURTH PHASE - MARA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY OR UiTM (2000 ONWARD)

In 1999, the Institute reached the climax of its growth when it was finally granted a university status which means it can offer undergraduate and postgraduate programmes for all its faculties or schools that were accredited and subsequently award the appropriate degree. As a university, UiTM continues to make its presence felt through its role:

1. as a centre that produces skillful and knowledgeable graduates who are able to meet the needs of industry
2. as a centre to foster the growth of knowledge among its students
3. as a centre to train its graduates to think analytically and critically over issues that have effects on the future of the nation and their own lives through classes comprising of quality lectures and practical training.
4. through its cooperation with the industry in an effort to establish quality and wise relationship in order to stabilize the market and ultimately provide opportunities for the human resources to obtain employment without difficulty [4].

UiTM rapid development after being granted the university status was more in the areas of infrastructure and academic. At present there are 25 faculties, the latest being the Faculty of Dentistry, 12 branch campuses, 3
satellite campuses, 7 city campuses and 19 colleges affiliated to it having a student enrolment of more than 100,000, with 4,899 academic staff and 5,412 administrative staff.

8 UiTM and the Political Aspiration of the Nation

8.1 Reducing the economic imbalance

Poverty eradication and reducing the gap in economic imbalances among the bumiputera and non-bumiputera have been the core of national development policy since Independence. The New Economic Policy has been successful in raising the middle income group. The growth of the middle class which forms the foundation of the social structure in Malaysia reflects the success of the government economic policies. The middle class has increased and in 1995 it formed almost half (47%) of the total workforce of 3.7 million.5 The success of the nation in reducing absolute poverty from 49.3% in 1970 to 12.8% in 1993 and less than 5.1% in 2002 is commendable. The existence of UiTM has contributed greatly in creating the middle income group. Its professional and pre-professional courses especially since the 1970s, have succeeded in creating the human capital for the workforce in the industry, corporate and banking sectors of the nation. By 2006, UiTM has produced about 300,000 graduates and manpower for the industrial and private sectors (Table 2).

Table 2. Total UiTM graduates by campus (1958-2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>No. of Graduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Shah Alam</td>
<td>171,607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Perlis</td>
<td>18,590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Kedah</td>
<td>3,084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Pulau Pinang</td>
<td>2,302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Perak</td>
<td>13,227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Negeri Sembilan</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Melaka</td>
<td>12,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Johor</td>
<td>13,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Pahang</td>
<td>11,274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Trengganu</td>
<td>16,674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Kelantan</td>
<td>7,731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Sabah</td>
<td>7,148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Sarawak</td>
<td>10,731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Affiliated PHIEs</td>
<td>5,863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>295,163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8.2 Education and training

The government aspires to increase professionals and skilled workers to generate the industrial processes. This means the production of the service category known as symbolic-analytic (Ishak Shaari : 1996), that is those who are involved in advertising, the mass media, lawyer, and bankers who earn a good income. Since its establishment, the UiTM has succeeded in balancing the educational opportunity between the bumiputera and non-bumiputera. Prior to this, the quota of concern is between the bumiputera and non-bumiputera in public higher education institutions. But with the Private Higher Institution of Education (PHIE) Act of 1996, the number of private higher education institutions has multiplied greatly. In December 2003 alone, there were about 536 registered private colleges which included 11 universities, 5 university colleges, 7 branch campuses of universities having 314,344 students.6 With only about 20% bumiputera students in the private institutions of higher learning, the presence of UiTM as a university having a big student population could be a balancing factor with respect to balancing the racial composition in higher education. UiTM could arrange for strategic alliances with bumiputera PHIEs to increase the number of bumiputera students. Its target of having 200,000 students could only be met through alliances with bumiputera PHIEs. This strategy is good because it kills two birds with one stone, that is it increases the number of bumiputera students and at the same time it strengthens the bumiputera PHIEs.

8.3 More development of the rural areas

Developing the rural areas is a priority of the government until today. UiTM can assist in the government in this effort to achieve the goal of this policy of rural development through having a substantial number of its branch campuses in the rural areas. Its location in Jengka, Kuala Pilah, Machang, Sri Iskandar, Segamat, Arau and other villages has helped realized this government policy of developing such areas. Radical changes in these rural lands have become the catalysts for further development. This will be in line with the policy of the present Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to improve the rural economy through transforming rural society so that a balance between rural and urban societies could be achieved. This could be done by transforming the rural sector from its traditional nature and having low productivity to that which is modern and has high productivity. The effort of developing the human capital in the rural areas should be multiplied so that the rural workforce will also be of high quality. This will also help the country to progress and to be able to face the modern and future challenges. With its location and academic programmes that are oriented for development in the rural areas, UiTM could play its role to meet the national aspiration of balancing the inequities between urban and rural areas.
8.4 Relationship between the races

Although the racial composition in Malaysia is more complex in comparison with other countries, Malaysia has succeeded in creating an atmosphere that is more peaceful compared to them. Efforts in balancing the interests of the bumiputera and non-bumiputera are significant in economy. The bumiputera has been protected through the Malaysian constitution under the Special Malay rights. Without these rights, most likely the bumiputera would not be able to achieve social progress and progress in the field of economy including higher education, commerce, industry and other professional areas at such speed. It was precisely through this process of balancing the interests of the group that was discriminated and marginalized in the past and the interests of the economically stronger group, that the government has succeeded in being just to both groups [7]. Thus, the establishment of UiTM grew out of this aspiration to preserve the rights of the bumiputera.

9 Conclusion

In its Restructuring UiTM 2001-2010 document, UiTM have outlined several dynamic growths in an effort to produce professionals for a pluralistic Malaysian society. The strategies involved raising awareness of the human dimensions, which involved transforming the mind, attitude, awareness, sense of gratitude, spirit, values and ethics, integrity and diligence to attain the aspiration of a university with a specific vision and mission in people and nation building [8]. With an enrollment projection for 2003-2010 targeted to increase by 21.9% in seven years or 3.1% annually, it is expected that UiTM will have about 120,000 students by 2010. This figure alone is sufficient to demonstrate the role of UiTM as a balancer in national economic development [3].

References:

Endnotes

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