

UMS VC: RPTM key to tackling student dropouts in Sabah

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KOTA KINABALU: The Malaysia Higher Education Development Plan (RPTM) 2026-2035 is a crucial strategic blueprint to strengthen the nation's higher education system, particularly in addressing student dropouts and expanding access to learning opportunities in Sabah.

Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Kasim Mansor said the RPTM, introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education and emphasised by Minister Datuk Seri Diraja Dr Zambry Abd Kadir, was designed as a dynamic policy document driven by multi-stakeholder collaboration grounded in human values and nation-building.

Kasim said the whole-of-nation approach underpinning the RPTM has a direct relevance for Sabah, which faces unique challenges such as vast geographical coverage, disparities in access to education, logistical and digital constraints, rising living costs, and the need for some students to enter the workforce early.

"These factors contribute to student attrition or prevent some from continuing their studies despite having received offers.

"This situation calls for a higher education system in Sabah that is more flexible and inclusive, aligned with local realities, so that educational opportunities can be sustained," he said in a statement on Saturday.

He said the RPTM's emphasis on student success is particularly important, as the effectiveness of higher education should be measured by the ability to retain



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students through graduation and ensure graduates are competitive in the job market.

For Sabah, this requires comprehensive support encompassing academic, financial, psychosocial and welfare aspects to reduce the risk of dropouts, especially among students from rural and interior areas, he said.

Kasim identified the introduction of Academic Bank Credits (ABC) as a key mechanism to address student attrition.

Through flexible learning across institutions, modes and study durations, students are allowed to temporarily defer their studies without losing their academic pathways.

"This approach provides Sabah students with greater room to balance family responsibilities, employment and learning," he said.

He also welcomed the federal government's continued commitment to inclusive

education, citing Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's announcement of tuition fee exemptions for about 3,000 students with disabilities at public universities, polytechnics and community colleges.

This was complemented by an increase in the quota for free education and the National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN) scholarships to 10,000 students from hardcore poor families.

Kasim said these targeted measures are highly significant for Sabah, ensuring that economic constraints do not remain a cause of dropouts among students with strong potential.

He further stressed the importance of synergy between Polytechnics and Community Colleges (POLYCC) and UMS in expanding learning opportunities through tiered education pathways, including credit transfers, bridging programmes and the implementation of ABC.

In line with UMS' aspiration as 'The BRAIN of Borneo', the university plays a key role as a regional driver of knowledge, innovation and leadership through work-based learning and upskilling initiatives aligned with Sabah's key economic sectors to enhance graduate employability.

"UMS is committed to realising the aspirations of RPTM 2026-2035 through a Sabah-centric approach to ensure that no Sabahan, including persons with disabilities and those from hardcore poor families, is left behind in accessing education and personal development opportunities," he said.