

Senator proposes more agro-focused universities

SIBU: Senator Robert Lau proposes that more technical-based universities, especially those focusing on agriculture, be set up in Sarawak to tap into the huge potential in the country's agro-food sector.

He lists the state's central region or the lower part of the Rajang Basin as a potential site for one such institution.

"One should be in the central region of Sarawak or the lower Rajang Basin, where the majority of idle land parcels and the rural poor folk are at.

"The campus (branch) of Universiti Putra Malaysia – previously known as 'Universiti Pertanian (Agriculture) Malaysia' – in Bintulu could be upgraded into a full-fledged university with a focus on agriculture, as it was originally planned," he said when debating the Supply Bill 2021 in Dewan Negara yesterday.

Adding on, Lau noted that Education Ministry had been allocated with RM50.4 billion, which accounted for more than 15 per cent of the federal budget, while the Ministry of Higher Education received 11.58 billion, which comprised 4.8 per cent of the total operating expenditure.

"Malaysia has 22 public universities and seven teaching hospitals. Out of these institutions, only one of them is in Sarawak, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas); also, there's only one in Sabah, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS).

"Both states have no teaching hospital. When will Sarawak and Sabah have teaching hospitals? When will Sarawak has more public universities?" he said.

Adding on, he pointed out that the operational budget for Unimas against the total for all the 22 universities across Malaysia was RM220 million versus RM7.531 billion, respectively, while the development budget was RM67 million versus RM2.819 billion, respectively.

"Sarawak is not getting her fair share of the higher education

budget. This serious imbalance has to be addressed."

On healthcare, Lau said there was still a serious lack in the provision of proper facilities, doctors, specialists and supporting staff in Sarawak and Sabah.

In illustrating the situation, he said the first modern public hospital in his hometown Sibu was the Lau King Howe Hospital, built using the donation from Lau King Howe in 1936.

"He (King Howe) sold his properties and donated most of his money to this hospital, which continued to be used until 1993, when Sibu finally had a new hospital. The new hospital is now congested and it needs to be expanded, as Sibu also serves a huge rural population where there is a real lack of primary healthcare," said the senator.

He noted that over the last five years under the 11th Malaysia Plan, only a sum of RM2.83 million had been spent on upgrading Sibu Hospital.

"That's just over RM500,000 every year (in the five years) for a hospital that's serving close to a million people and the majority of them are the rural folk."

Nonetheless, Lau regarded Sibu Hospital as 'being fortunate' in that there were many members of the local community who had 'been supportive and been filling in many of the funding gaps'.

Adding on, the senator disclosed that the two units of Seegene medical equipment for testing of Covid-19 – better known as the PCR testing machine – and also the renovation to turn a pantry at the hospital into the laboratory for Covid-19 testing, were all sponsored by local companies at a cost of about RM500,000.

"I hope this Budget (2021) would have something for Sibu Hospital.

"On the top wish-list is for a dedicated specialist building, with all the supporting facilities and personnel – the estimated cost is RM340 million," said Lau.



Lau delivers his points during the debate on the Supply Bill 2021 in Dewan Negara.