

Working towards an understanding

The semi-final draft of the long-awaited ethnic relations module has been vetted by about 100 lecturers and administrators from various public universities in Malaysia.

NURJEHAN MOHAMED and **J. THEEBAN** write on the outcome.

WITH the new ethnic relations module due to be launched next month, there are still a few adjustments that need to be made.

Lecturers and administrators from public institutions of higher learning throughout Malaysia met recently at a four-day workshop to evaluate the new ethnic relations module.

Public university students taking the compulsory subject nationwide will use this new module.

For now, teachers are relying on just the syllabus and their own reference materials to teach ethnic relations in Malaysia.

With the introduction of the new module in July, there will be more uniformity in what is taught in class.

The module is divided into nine chapters that include concepts of ethnic relations, the plurality and pluralistic society of Malaysia, modernisation, the economy and economics in the context of ethnic relations, religion and integration.

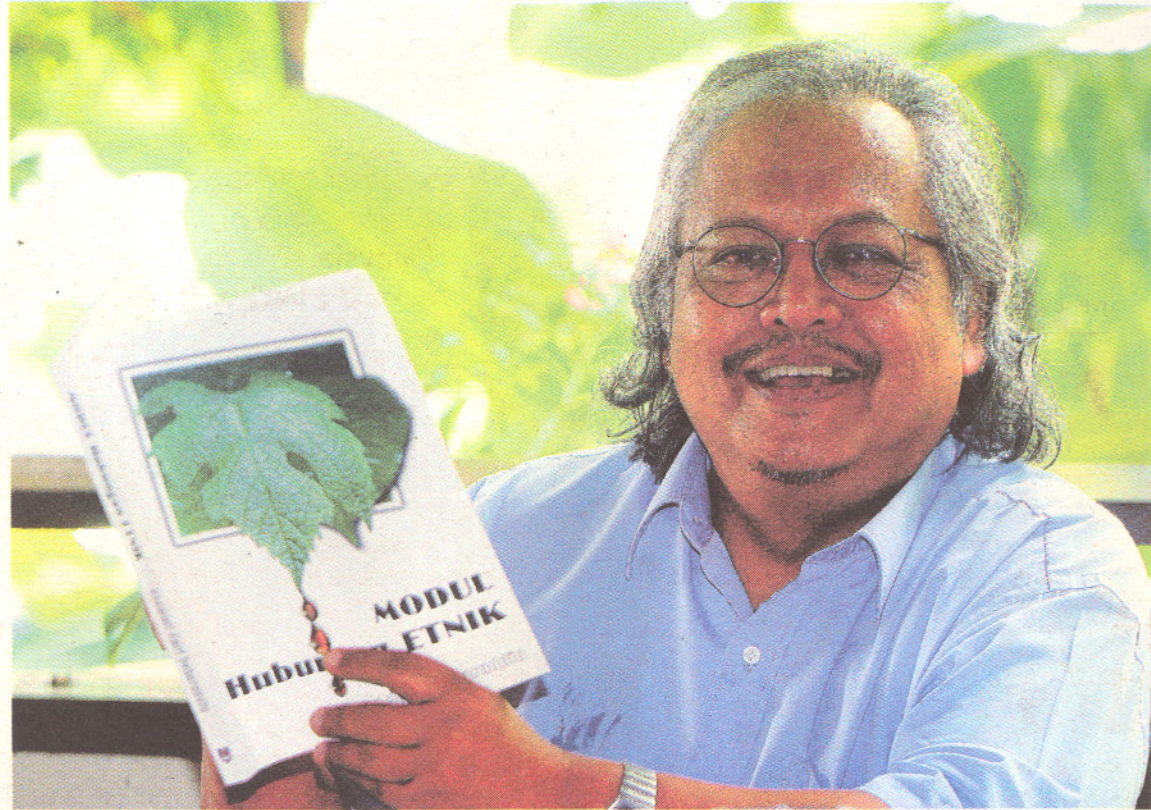
Notwithstanding spelling errors, language usage and minor factual fallacies, feedback for the module was generally positive, says Professor Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, the chief editor of this ambitious project.

He sees the comments from participants — negative and positive — as an encouraging sign.

"No one said anything about the contents being irrelevant; their main contention was the way that it was technically presented such as language use and layout," says Shamsul.

While minor adjustments to the module will be done before being made available to students, additional suggested changes in terms of subdivision of topics and addition of information will only come in later revisions.

Among the suggestions for changes was for the inclusion of more beliefs, including those from minorities, such as Sikhism, Taoism, ancestral worship and animism.



It is not the final copy, says Shamsul Amri

The workshop also had the added benefit of giving more ownership and responsibility to the people who will be delivering the module.

"It is not the final copy — this is a

living document that will always need to be amended to suit the changing needs of Malaysian society," says the professor of social anthropology and director of the Institute of Occidental Studies at

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

The consensus among participants is that the new module provides suitable coverage of topics that need to be addressed in this subject.

Associate Professor Dr Durrishah Idrus, dean of the Faculty of Management and Human Resource Development at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Skudai

Compared to other books, those dealing with ethnic relations require more attention and scrutiny to avoid inciting the wrong reactions. The module is necessary as there are issues that need more elaboration and discussion, with the input of more expert opinions, rather than just a simple book on ethnic relations.

University students will get a broad overview of the subject and deeper insights into certain issues. Ethnic relations are the foundation of our country so for it to move forward, we need to maintain harmonious relations with each other.

At UTM, there are several papers on ethnic relations but only to those taking



the subjects. None had the scope or intent of the ethnic relations course to be taken by all public university students.

This course is meant to foster awareness and develop a better understanding of the situation in Malaysia and its contributing factors. And this requires a much greater effort to produce a module that would be fair to all.

Sociologist Dr Lee Yok Fee

I do not see the new module as a solution to better ethnic relations, but it is a start. It has allowed us to discuss ethnic relations openly, where in the past it was considered too sensitive a topic to raise.

The course is relevant to not only university students but to secondary students as

well. The draft, in itself, provides students with analytical tools to apply to their everyday life.

The text is one part of fostering better ethnic relations — actually going out and doing activities such as community outreach. Exchange programmes are another. That is why teachers

taking the subject should not be too focused on the academic aspect that they lose sight of the bigger picture.

We must remember that ultimately, we want students to interact with each other — to be more aware and sensitive towards others in real life.



Dr Sarjit S. Gill, a social anthropologist at Universiti Putra Malaysia

I have been teaching the unit for the past three semesters and I see a marked improvement over the module that my institution was using prior to the latest version.

This new module is comprehensive and it shows the input from various groups. Aside from some editorial work that still needs to be done, I see no problems with the text.

For later revisions, more of the contribution of minorities should be added. We tend to focus on the Malays, Chinese and Indians and neglect the others. Other religions and beliefs such as Sikhism, Bahai, Confucianism and animism should also be included.

I do not subscribe to the course being about national unity so much as social integration where respect for others is the basic concept.

This would mean an appreciation of other cultures and beliefs that goes beyond the “open house” tradition where we only know each other’s food. I believe our diversity is our strength.

For the course, the focus should be on similarities rather than differences. The module is a starting point which could later lead to interfaith and interethnic dialogues.

