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 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.
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.

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 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.

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