

Publication: The Straits Times, p B10
Date: 02 November 2017
Headline: Taking a pay cut to start afresh in law



Mr David Koh, 49, was a Shell ventures manager before enrolling in the Singapore Management University's juris doctor programme. PHOTO: SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

Taking a pay cut to start afresh in law

When Mr David Koh graduates from law school, he would earn – as a fresh lawyer – just a fraction of what he used to draw as a ventures manager at oil and gas firm Shell.

At 49, he is also among the older students at the Singapore Management University's (SMU) juris doctor (JD) programme, which has an average student age of 29.

On why he is giving up a well-paying job, Mr Koh said: "It's motivated by an interest to go back to the university – it's in some sense to fulfil an earlier wish that had been set aside for too many years. The motivation is not income.

"In many ways, that 20 years of work has been fulfilling, but it reached a point where I didn't think it could go any further. It was time to do what I truly wanted."

He joined the two- to three-year programme in 2015 and is currently in the third year of study. His first degree was in electrical engineering in 1993, adding a master's in business administration in 2003.

Having practical work experience matters in being a better lawyer, Mr Koh believes.

"If you know economics, business, some engineering – it adds that insight and understanding of what the client wants."

SMU's JD programme, which is a postgraduate course that is done after a bachelor's degree in some other discipline, has 95 students today. The average work experience of the students is four years.

One challenge Mr Koh faced as a married man with two children, aged 14 and 20, is having to juggle school and family commitments. His daughter is also studying in SMU.

Mr Koh said that while expanding the JD programme might be a good idea, how to make full use of these graduates with such diverse experience is something both the private and public sectors need to consider.

Nevertheless, he hopes to spend at least two to three years as a fresh lawyer in a law firm, to "get a flavour" of litigation and court-related work.

"I won't say forever because I can't predict the future, but to the extent that it remains exciting and interesting, why not?" added Mr Koh.

Lim Min Zhang