

Law schools here not planning to cut enrolment

UniSIM law school still set to open despite expected glut of lawyers

By AMELIA TENG

DESPITE an expected glut of lawyers in the next few years, the two law schools here will not be cutting enrolment.

Plans to open a third law school at SIM University (UniSIM) will also not be affected, said the Law Ministry (MinLaw) yesterday.

Law Minister K. Shanmugam's recent warning that Singapore could have too many lawyers, and that there could be too few jobs for them in the next few years, has become a hot talking point among undergraduates at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Singapore Management University (SMU).

He said last Saturday that the

number of lawyers with practising certificates here has leapt by nearly 25 per cent over four years, to more than 4,400 as of March last year. About 1,500 are expected to join them in the next three years, he added.

NUS law dean Simon Chesterman told The Straits Times: "The comments... have inspired a lot of discussion among current law students, some of whom are anxious about their job prospects."

Still, there are no plans to change the 240 to 250 places NUS offers annually, he said, suggesting that any cut will simply push students to study law abroad. "It's important that Singaporeans get the chance to be trained for the profession here," he added.

Students admit it has become

tougher to get training contracts.

Every year, about 400 local law graduates, including 150 from SMU, apply for about 500 training contracts offered by law firms. The six-month contracts give would-be lawyers the real world training required of them before they are called to the Bar.

Final-year NUS law student Lam Zhen Yu, 24, said: "Most of our seniors received contracts by the end of the third year in school. Now, some year-four students haven't secured contracts yet." Many send resumes to as many as 20 firms or go for several internships to increase their chances of being selected, he added. Some also worry about the extra competition when the law school at UniSIM opens.

But MinLaw noted that NUS and SMU graduates have "done well" in getting training contracts. Between 2009 and last year, nearly 94 per cent secured

them compared with 70 per cent for returning overseas graduates.

The key issue, it said, was a mismatch between supply and demand. While there are more than enough corporate lawyers, there is a shortage of those practising family and criminal law. UniSIM's law school, with its community law focus, will help bridge this gap, MinLaw said yesterday.

New law graduates The Straits Times spoke to said many chose to work in corporate and commercial law not just because of the higher pay, but because they were not ready to handle the "emotional demands" of community law.

"You need to have some form of calling to deal with work involving families, divorce and crime," said a 25-year-old who graduated from SMU's law school this year.

"And the unfortunate fact is that, sometimes, they can't afford to pay you."

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