

An avoidable glut of lawyers?

FROM FONG WEI KURK

How things have changed in the 12 years since I qualified as a lawyer. (“Spike in overseas grads ‘the reason S’pore faces lawyer glut’”; Aug 21)

“Law school” here no longer refers to only the National University of Singapore but also Singapore Management University (SMU), and a third is on the way with an emphasis on criminal and family law.

The NUS law school’s annual intake has increased from 150 to 250. The Fourth Committee on the Supply of Lawyers recommended just last year to increase SMU’s annual undergraduate law intake from 120 to 180 over three years.

The third law school is expected to take in 50 to 75 students yearly. Meanwhile, the number of approved overseas universities for studying law has increased from seven or eight in the United Kingdom to 35 from four countries.

Malaysian practitioners who fulfil certain requirements are permitted to practise here, and other foreign lawyers may now register to practise



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Singapore law if they possess certain qualifications and satisfy certain requirements.

The new Qualifying Foreign Law Practice licences granted to foreign law firms, for permitted areas of legal practice, has increased the number of law firms in Singapore.

Although the Law Minister attributed the possible glut to the number of Singaporeans studying overseas to be lawyers, the dramatic increase in the number of lawyers available locally comes from all the factors mentioned above.

With the increasing internationalisation of legal work and preference for arbitration over court litigation, law firms can and do hire foreign-qualified lawyers, sometimes at the expense of local-qualified ones.

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As a mentor in the NUS Law Alumni Mentorship Programme, I understand that current law students are concerned about the situation.

One wonders if such supply and demand fluctuation arises from somewhat short-sighted policymaking. That there is a potential glut of lawyers is difficult to comprehend, given that the Government accepted the recommendations last year to increase the number of lawyers.

Granted, the supply of lawyers must match the macro-economic environment, but what does one say to a generation of students who were lulled into the complacency of thinking that a career as a lawyer necessarily ensues from a law education?

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