

# Singapore to open third law school

**Move is one of many to increase supply of lawyers here to meet growing demand**

By **MICHELLE QUAH**  
 [SINGAPORE] Singapore will be opening a third law school, catered to those interested in pursuing a career in "community law" – that is, those who will service the needs of the community by practising criminal law and family law – as the current and projected supply of these types of lawyers is simply not enough to ensure that the legal needs of the community are met.

This was among 60 recommendations made by

the 4th Committee on the Supply of Lawyers that looked into whether the supply of legal professionals here would be sufficient to meet Singapore's legal and business needs.

The recommendations were presented to the media yesterday by Law Minister K Shanmugam, who had in March last year appointed Judge of Appeal Justice VK Rajah to chair this committee.

Among the Committee's other key recommendations was the proposal to increase the annual undergraduate law intake of the Singapore Management University (SMU) from 120 students to 180 students over the next three years or so; this will raise the

## Lawyer-to-population ratios



	NUMBER OF PRACTISING LAWYERS	POPULATION	LAWYERS PER 1,000 PEOPLE
Singapore	4,432 (fused)	5.3m	0.83
Hong Kong	1,155 (barristers) + 7,152 (solicitors) = 8,307	7.2m	1.16
London, UK	1,219 (barristers) + 20,352 (solicitors) = 21,571	8.2m	2.64
Victoria, Australia	1,927 (barristers) + 15,862 (solicitors) = 17,789	5.6m	3.15
New York, USA	163,798	19.6m	8.37

Source: Report of the 4th Committee on the Supply of Lawyers

number of lawyers in Singapore by about 17 per cent, and will help meet the demand for lawyers practising cross-border and local commercial/corporate law.

The Committee is also

asking that the list of Overseas Scheduled Universities (OSUs) – whose law degrees are recognised for the purposes of admission to the Singapore Bar – be reviewed and refreshed every

five years, so that it can better act as the "qualitative sieve" that it currently is, and that the double-degree programmes offered by OSUs be recognised, subject to their meeting specific criteria.

Graduates must, however, obtain at least a lower second-class degree or equivalent to be regarded as a "qualified person" to be admitted to the Singapore Bar.

Notably, the Committee recommended retaining the current position of not recognising external law degrees.

The most striking recommendation, however, remains the opening of a third law school. The Committee, in its review, found that there will be a pressing shortage of lawyers who will serve the needs of the community by practising criminal law and family law – a shortage that would eventually affect access to justice for the average citizen and, in turn, raise fundamental questions about the proper administration of justice.

"A legal system which is priced beyond the means of the average citizen loses its credibility for effectiveness and fairness," the report said.

The Committee found that large law firms do not suffer from a shortage of lawyers in relation to cross-border and local commercial/corporate law, as their market and spending power have generally allowed them to attract as many lawyers and trainees as they need. These are also the areas of law which the students in the current law schools in SMU and the National University of Singapore (NUS), and those who study law abroad, gravitate to.

On the other hand, the small law firms, which generally practise a greater amount of community law, are much more under-populated, as most students do not find that the practice of community law meets their professional aspirations.

"The third law school (will be based) on a slightly different model, not the same as the NUS law school and the SMU law school, but (one) catering more to part-time students, mature students, people who have chosen a career and now want to choose law as a second career," said Mr Shanmugam, who is considering the recommendations. "So, the intention is that this will plug a gap in the market and provide alternative routes to becoming a lawyer."

"The intention is that the curriculum, the structure and the type of people that this new law school would look at would be people who have an interest in those areas (community law). Though, to be clear, when they come out of the third law school, they will still have to get through our Bar process – the same as the law students from the first two law schools – and they will be qualified to practise any area of the law and join any law firm. It's not a different type of qualification that precludes them from practising any specific area," the minister added.

He also said it would be geared more towards mature students – working adults such as paralegals, social workers or law en-

forcement officers – and "there will be a limit on the number of A-Level students who can go in".

The Committee has recommended, based on a survey of the current needs of law firms, that the third law school have an initial annual intake of around 75 students. Details as to which institute will host this new law school, entrance criteria, curriculum and faculty will be worked out between the Law Ministry and the Education Ministry in due course. Mr Shanmugam also said it would be premature, at this stage, to discuss the sort of criteria the potential host institute would need to meet in order to be considered.

However, it is certain that the third law school will not be at NUS or SMU; the Committee's report cited the dean of NUS Law, whose school takes in about 240 students a year, saying that there are financial, spatial and pedagogical constraints on further expansion, while the SMU Law School will reach its limit once it ups its intake to 180 students.

The Committee also pointed out that the supply of lawyers is affected by lawyers leaving the profession mid-career, and it made a number of recommendations to reduce the attrition rate. Law firms will be encouraged to accommodate flexible schedules such as part-time work, rotate their trainees to give them more exposure, and design different career advancement tracks for their lawyers.

The 4th Committee continues the work of previous committees which have periodically reviewed the state of the legal profession in Singapore in the context of projected future demand.