

Proposal for third law school with focus on community law practice

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A high-level committee set up to look into the supply of lawyers in Singapore has proposed setting up a third law school with a focus on training prospective lawyers keen on practising community law.



Law Minister K Shanmugam (L) chairs news conference on report of 4th Committee on the Supply of Lawyers, and Permanent Secretary (Law Ministry) Dr Beh Swan Gin. (Photo: Ministry of Law)

SINGAPORE: A high-level committee set up to look into the supply of lawyers in Singapore has proposed setting up a third law school with a focus on training prospective lawyers keen on practising community law.

The committee has also proposed increasing the annual undergraduate law intake at the Singapore Management University (SMU) from 120 to 180 students over three years.

This will ensure that any future or unexpected increase in demand for lawyers to handle cross-border and local commercial or corporate work, particularly if Singapore's legal sector is further liberalised in the future, can be adequately met by locally-qualified lawyers.

These are just two of six key recommendations made by the 4th Committee on the Supply of Lawyers, whose report was released on Tuesday at a news conference chaired by Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K Shanmugam.

On 6th March 2012, Mr Shanmugam announced in Parliament that he had appointed Justice V K Rajah, Judge of Appeal of the Supreme Court of Singapore, to chair the 4th Committee on the Supply of Lawyers.

The aim of this committee was to review the supply of Singapore legal professionals to meet the legal and business needs of Singapore.

It examined the factors affecting the supply of and demand for lawyers in Singapore, and took into account the needs of the legal sector, local and overseas sources of supply of law graduates and attrition.

The Committee made three primary observations.

Firstly, that the demand for lawyers practising cross-border and local commercial and corporate law can, with a slight calibrated increase, be met through the supply of lawyers from the local law schools, and Singapore citizens and Permanent Residents who are law graduates from Overseas Scheduled Universities (OSUs).

Secondly, the Committee felt that at present there is a shortage of lawyers who practise community law and cautioned that if no measures were taken to address this, the shortage will be made worse.

And thirdly, the team felt it would be desirable if the attrition rate of legal professionals could be reduced, especially for lawyers in private practice.

On the proposed third law school, the Committee recommends that it should be hosted by a suitable local tertiary institution that could offer part-time as well as full-time LLB programmes for undergraduates and graduate students, or both.

But this would depend on the resources of its host institution.

Mr Shanmugam said: "A third law school on a slightly different model, not the same as NUS Law School and SMU Law school but catering more to mature students, people who have chosen a career and now want to choose law as a career to move over.

"The intention is that it will plug the gap in the market and provide alternative routes to becoming a lawyer. Our assessment so far is that interest is likely to be high but these are things we will assess as we set out and look at the numbers, we can start small."

The school's initial annual intake should be about 75 students with a preference for candidates who are genuinely interested in practising community law.

Mr Lok Vi Ming, president of the Law Society of Singapore, said: "We just have to make sure that all concerns of the lawyers are taken on board both from the big firms and the small firms, because if there are too many lawyers that could of course result in a lot of anxiety for the existing members of the legal profession as to whether or not there would be just too many lawyers coming on stream into a field that has not been fully developed.

"This is something we need to make sure that the calibration is as accurate as possible having regards to the need of the profession and the size of the market."

The Committee said the school should aim to take in mainly working adults such as paralegals, social workers or law enforcement officers.

It should also maintain a restricted number of places for 'A' Level students who have a strong interest in practising community law.

The Committee recommends that graduates of the third law school must meet the minimum requirements for admission to the Singapore Bar, attend and pass the Part B Bar Course and Examination, as well as fulfil all other prescribed requirements.

On the issue of attrition in the legal industry, the Committee said education is the key to addressing the problem.

It recommends a two-pronged approach of modifying practices in the two existing local law schools and law firms.

It suggests that the two existing local law schools undertake a more targeted selection of law school applicants to increase the chances that those who are admitted will remain in practice.

The Committee said it would be helpful to prepare young law graduates early for the realities of practice before they enter the legal market.

Law students should also be given a realistic view of what practice is like as part of their law school experience.

It suggests that a more structured internship programme could be developed by the two local law schools, similar to industrial attachments required in other disciplines.

The Committee recommends that the two local law schools work together with the Law Society to set up a centralised and more structured system for internships.

It also propose that pro bono activities be actively incorporated as part of the law school curriculum. This will help to develop a pro bono culture within the legal fraternity as a whole in two main ways.

It will expose students to the realities of practice in community law, and also equip them with the necessary skills and relationships to do pro bono work on a continued basis after graduation.

Turning to the law firms, the Committee encourages them to redesign work to accommodate flexible schedules so that part-time work can become a much more viable alternative for lawyers starting a family or assuming caregiving roles.

Separately, the Ministry of Law said the government welcomes the Committee's recommendations... and has agreed that the SMU Law School should increase its 2013 intake from 120 to 150 students as an initial step.

It adds that it will also be in consultation with the Ministry of Education and will study the proposal for a third law school.

Legal industry experts said SIM University is a likely choice to host the third law school when established.

Commenting on the proposal for the third law school, a member of the Committee and former president of the Law Society of Singapore, Mr Wong Meng Meng, noted: "This is an



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excellent idea, as the chief mandate of this new law school is to produce lawyers interested in practising community law.

"By community law, we mean practices in such areas as family law, criminal law, and other areas which generally affect the man in the street. The danger of concentrating on producing top lawyers in corporate finance or high-worth litigation is that we ignore the needs of the ordinary citizen. This would not be good for society as a whole.

"The existing universities are understandably reluctant to have a situation which may impact on their hard-earned reputations as top universities, so the suggestion of a third university which will not compete with the existing two universities, and produce lawyers in the areas which the two universities have no strong interest, is a good solution for all parties."

- CNA/de