

Mixed response from lawyers to proposal for third law school

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A proposal to set up a third law school in Singapore to address the shortage of community lawyers has received mixed response from the Association of Criminal Lawyers.



File photo of president of the Association of Criminal Lawyers Subhas Anandan (R).

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SINGAPORE: A proposal to set up a third law school in Singapore to address the shortage of community lawyers has received mixed response from the Association of Criminal Lawyers.

Its president Subhas Anandan believes the problem can be addressed through other ways and that the third law school should only be considered a last resort.

The Fourth Committee on the Supply of Lawyers, led by Judge of Appeal Justice VK Rajah which released its report on Tuesday, observed that there's a shortage of lawyers practising community law which includes family law and criminal law.

The report said that if no measures are taken to address the situation, the shortage will be exacerbated.

But president of the Association of Criminal Lawyers Subhas Anandan said the solution is not found in having another law school.

"To me, criminal law is a passion that you enjoy doing it, you don't care for the money, you believe in protecting a person's liberty, his life, so you have the passion. You cannot instil passion in the people. So what you have to do is try and throw them into the pool and hope that after a few years, they will enjoy it and they will have the passion.

"You can choose a few students and tell them we will give you a scholarship, we will give you incentives, provided you come out of graduation and you do three or four years of criminal law or community law, and what we hope is that after three to four years after doing criminal law, they might get a passion for it, they might enjoy it and out of ten pupils you get three or four thinking, that way you have already achieved your target

"You think of a third university because there is a shortage of people, in two years' time you see shipping or insurance having a shortage, are you going to have a fourth university to fill the problem? That's not the solution.

"Criminal law and family law, the fees you can charge is very little. We are dealing with ordinary man in the street who has committed some offence, he may not have the money to pay. What is there to ensure that those who go through this third university will practise criminal law because they go through all the exams, they are admitted to the Bar and they are not precluded from doing other things?

"Are you going to bond them? What are the mechanisms you are going to use to make sure they will do criminal law or family law, these are things you have to think about. Besides giving students a greater grounding in community law, there are also other plans for the third law school to implement a conversion course."

Mr Hri Kumar Nair, a member of the Fourth Committee on Supply of Lawyers, said: "The other exciting part about the third university is that eventually we hope that it would be able to run a conversion course that is for those who already have law degrees but are unable to practice because it's not from a scheduled university or have external degrees. With their external degree they can run a conversion course and then practise law, and that's something which a lot of people have been looking forward to."

The Committee's report also addressed ways to make internships in law firms more productive.

Prof Yeo Tiong Ming, Dean of School of Law at the Singapore Management University, said all SMU students are required to do at least 80 hours of community service. He said from this year, law students will need to perform at least 20 hours of pro bono legal work within this requirement.

Prof Simon Chesterman, Dean of the NUS Faculty of Law, suggests breaking up the university holidays into mini-terms and to have a more structured approach to internships.



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Prof Chesterman said: "For the moment, frankly, many firms use internships as PR exercises, encourage students to come in, promote the firm as a friendly place to work, that's all... but it's important that students have a realistic understanding as to what it is to practice law.

"Because if they go into the firm on day one when they are practising and suddenly are confronted with time sheets, long work hours and so on, then they might suddenly have a change of heart and realise they have not got what they had bargained for. Having a more structured approach to internships will enable us to get to survey the field as to the opportunities available and go in with their minds open."

Mr Lok Vi Ming, president of the Law Society of Singapore, said: "By learning, it doesn't really mean you do lots of research in the library. It can also mean you come into an internship with your eyes open to see and to understand as much as possible what goes on in a law firm and in the life of a lawyer, to see how a lawyer responds to an emergency, how he handles various kinds of situations and legal problems. That's already a learning process without opening any textbooks."

The Committee's report observed that an informal survey amongst a group of lawyers showed that nearly 70 per cent left the practice due to stress as a result of the pace of work and workload.

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