

Singapore to set up third law school

It will focus on criminal, family law due to lack of lawyers in these fields

By **THAM YUEN-C**

SINGAPORE is to set up a third law school that will emphasise criminal and family law, in a move to address the shortage of lawyers in these fields.

It will be geared towards attracting mid-career professionals who want to make law their new career, said Law Minister K. Shanmugam yesterday.

“Look at this as giving people a second chance,” he added.

He cited especially paralegals, social workers and law enforcement officers, people already with an interest in community law.

Initially, the school will take in

75 students and only a few places will be set aside for those with A levels, he said.

The school is among six recommendations made by a committee set up in March last year to review the supply of lawyers here.

The Government has accepted all of them, Mr Shanmugam said at a press conference on the findings of the committee headed by Judge of Appeal V.K. Rajah.

The acute shortage of lawyers in criminal and community law is especially felt by smaller law firms that typically practise in these fields. They struggle to find young lawyers willing to join their firms, noted the committee.

“Only the top students in each cohort gain entry to NUS Law and SMU Law, while those who study law abroad are usually put to substantial financial expense,” it noted, referring to the National University of Singapore and the Singapore Management University.

“Anecdotally, most of these individuals do not find that the practice of community law meets their professional aspirations,” it added.

The new school was welcomed by lawyers like Mr Yap Wai Ming, director of Stamford Law Corporation. It is a good step in creating a niche for “the people who are committed to this kind of work”, he said.

Mr Yap added: “A lot of these people do it for the love of it.”

Details on when the school will start and where it will be sited

were not available yesterday.

But what is certain is that it will not be at NUS or SMU. Mr Shanmugam noted that both have a law school.

Also, the emphasis on community law does not mean its graduates can practise only in these areas, because they still have to meet the minimum requirements for admission to the Singapore Bar.

Beyond undergraduate classes, the proposed school will offer a conversion course and examinations for those with law degrees from universities not on Singapore’s list of approved overseas institutions.

The five other proposals made by the committee include raising SMU’s intake of law students from 120 to 180 over the next three years.

The increase is to meet the de-



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mand in growth areas such as cross-border as well as local corporate and commercial work.

NUS, which takes in about 240 students a year, has reached its optimum capacity, the committee noted.

Singapore has about 4,400 lawyers, a rise from 3,500 in 2008.

But having more is not good enough, said the committee, which suggested ways to reduce the number of lawyers leaving the profession.

It found that in the first 10 years of practice, the average attrition rate of each cohort is about 14 per cent. The push factors include long hours, heavy workload, the difficulty in reaching the top echelon in a firm and law students having unrealistic expectations of the job.

✉ yuenc@sph.com.sg

Review of approved overseas law degrees

EVERY five years, Singapore will review the list of overseas universities whose law degrees are recognised here, Law Minister K. Shanmugam said yesterday.

This undertaking will be a first since the list was introduced in 1993.

It follows the Government accepting the recommendation of a committee looking into the supply of lawyers.

The committee, chaired by Judge of Appeal V. K. Rajah, found that precise selection criteria were not spelt out as the list was used mainly to

constrain the number of law graduates educated in the United Kingdom.

It suggested the list be refreshed to “better fulfil its present function as a qualitative sieve”.

The review will be done by the Singapore Institute of Legal Education, a statutory board, which will make its recommendations to the Law Ministry.

The committee suggests that it uses the rankings of The (London) Times Good University Guide, The Guardian University Guide and the Complete University

Guide to review the 19 approved UK universities.

It also proposed that the bottom 10 universities, particularly those not among the top 15 UK universities, may be taken off the list. Other universities could be added to the list.

About 1,050 Singaporeans are pursuing undergraduate law degrees at approved universities overseas, with 729 of them in the UK.

The review will also apply, with modifications, to the approved universities in Australia and New Zealand.

JALELAH ABU BAKER