

Hope for new law school: Generalists, specialists

Indranee also hopes graduates can marry work experience with legal know-how

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Students from Singapore's proposed third law school will graduate with knowledge that spans various fields of law.

But Senior Minister of State for Law and Education Indranee Rajah hopes its focus on mid-career professionals interested in family and criminal law will produce lawyers strong in both general and specialised areas.

The institution was announced by Law Minister K. Shanmugam last Tuesday.

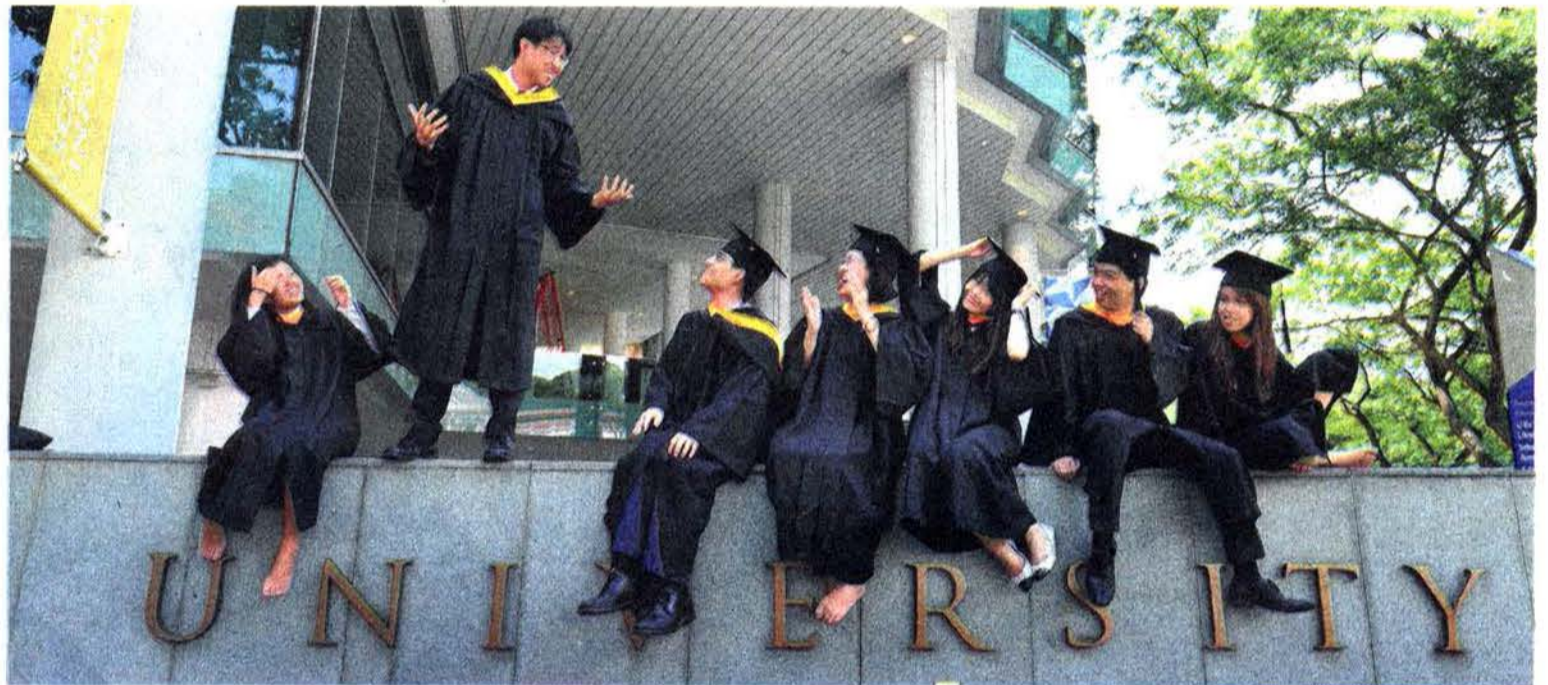
Ms Indranee was responding to concerns expressed by lawyers about how effectively the new school would address the shortage of family and criminal lawyers.

Few details about the proposed school have been released.

But Ms Indranee told *The Sunday Times* that there are people who are "passionate" about these fields and keen to start a career in law after having gained experience elsewhere.

Speaking on the sidelines of a Chartered Institute of Arbitrators (Singapore) event last Thursday, she said: "What we're hoping to have in these graduates is that combination of work experience and the requisite legal knowledge."

"Think about ex-social workers who have experience dealing with family relationships. They could be very effective family



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The proposed third law school will target mid-career professionals interested in family and criminal law. Senior Minister of State Indranee Rajah hopes it will produce lawyers strong in both general and specialised areas.

law practitioners after adding a law degree to that."

She hoped the new school would be different from existing ones at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Singapore Management University (SMU).

Both offer fundamental subjects such as contract law, but NUS also emphasises areas such as international law and arbitration, and SMU, corporate law.

Setting up a new school was one of six recommendations made by a committee reviewing the supply of lawyers. All six have been accepted by the Government.

The school could allow students to take subjects "complementary" to fundamental ones, said Ms Indranee. For example, former paralegals and law enforcement officers interested in criminal law might also be able to take courses in criminal psychology or forensics.

SIM University (UniSIM) president Cheong Hee Kiat agreed that the proposed school should have its own niche.

UniSIM offers courses in social work and counselling, and is among the institutions that the new law school could be set up in; another is the Singapore Institute of Technology.

"The unique profile of the students and the perspectives they bring as mature students will differentiate this school from the rest," said Professor Cheong.

Reactions to the proposal have been mixed.

Lawyers interviewed by *The Sunday Times* cautioned that having a school just for criminal and family law might give the impression that those practising in these areas are not as good as those in more glamorous or lucrative fields of law such as commercial litigation.

Another concern related to resources. Family lawyer Yap

Teong Liang noted that they could be stretched thin among the three schools, which might then have to compete against one another.

Criminal lawyer S. Radakrishnan expressed doubt that graduates of the proposed school would necessarily choose to practise community law.

However, Ms Indranee said family and criminal law touch on the everyday lives of people and are just as important as other fields. If the proposed third law school produces specialist practitioners, it could raise the profile of these fields, she added.

"That's not to say there aren't good community law practitioners now - there are many. There's just more demand for the commercial-type subjects at the moment, and that's precisely what we're trying to address."

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