

BOOST FOR LEGAL EDUCATION

Third law school to meet 'critical shortage' of community lawyers

School to target mature students, help ease recruitment concerns for smaller firms

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SINGAPORE—A third law school is in the pipeline to address the “critical shortage” of lawyers practising community law — which includes family law, and particularly, criminal law — the Ministry of Law announced yesterday.

Many young law graduates tend to gravitate towards more lucrative areas, such as corporate litigation. To counter this, the new school will target career-switchers and mature students — those who want to become lawyers because they have a passion for community law. Intake of A-Level students will be restricted.

This new law school, which will provide a five-year part-time degree programme, will come on board “quite soon” although neither a timeline nor a host institution has been set, said Law Minister K Shanmugam at a press conference yesterday on the recommendations made by the 4th Committee on the Supply of Lawyers.

The committee, headed by Judge of Appeal V K Rajah, was tasked with looking at how to augment the talent pool for lawyers and the needs of smaller firms here, among other issues.

The shortage of community law practitioners, particularly in criminal law, is not new. Former Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong had previously spoken about the need to do more to attract younger lawyers into criminal law, saying the work of these practitioners is “essential to the stability of the criminal justice system”.

Yesterday, Mr Shanmugam not-

ed that the new law school will “plug the gap” for smaller firms — usually focused on community law — which have trouble recruiting new blood.

The new school also provides “alternate pathways” for those looking for a career change or those who take external law degrees, he added.

He said: “You can also look at this as a second chance, as an option to come back and do law. It’s really part of the process as a society where we create multiple pathways, more options, more opportunities.”

Mr Shanmugam also assured that while the focus of the new school will be on community law, students will also be taught all aspects of law and “will not be a different category of lawyers”. They will also be free to practise any area of law upon graduation, he added.

The projected initial intake of 75 students will help boost the overall supply of lawyers by almost a fifth — 17 per cent — even as the committee recommended that Singapore Management University’s law intake increase from 120 to 180 over the next three years. The National University of Singapore will keep its intake at 240 because it is already operating at optimum capacity.

Prospective students for the third law school must also be able to meet the minimum requirements for admission to the Singapore Bar, such as achieving at least a lower second-class degree.

Most lawyers TODAY spoke to welcomed the news, including the move to target mature students.

Said criminal lawyer Josephus Tan, who himself entered law school at age 25: “There is a common view that for mature students or adults doing well in their career to want to make a switch, they are usually people who are in search of something more, like their beliefs, and they will probably have the knowledge of conviction and passion needed for the two areas.”

Still, veteran criminal lawyer Subhas Anandan said more has to be done to “propagate” the noble ideas of criminal law. There could also be scholarships for further studies in criminal law, for instance.

“It may not last because the passion is not there but when people are involved in this, bonded three or five years doing this thing, they might really get a passion for it,” he said.

The committee also made other recommendations, such as having a conversion course for those with external law degrees or law degrees from non-Overseas Scheduled Universities (OSU), and reviewing and refreshing the list of OSUs, including the recognition of double-degree programmes from these schools.

To address the attrition rate, it suggested redesigning work structure to accommodate flexible schedules — particularly for lawyers who are caregivers or who want to start families — and introducing support schemes for lawyer welfare, such as health insurance, retirement planning and benefits.



VIDEO PROPOSAL FOR THIRD LAW SCHOOL WITH FOCUS ON COMMUNITY LAW PRACTICE
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