

# Focus on tech and the law at new SMU centre

Research programme in computational law has govt support through a \$15m boost

## Dominic Low

Singapore is to undertake a first-of-its-kind research on creating a working programming language for the country's laws and contracts.

This language will be the foundation for specially trained computer programmers to create digital contracts and other legal documents.

The documents will, in turn, help businesses to address their legal needs and obligations, potentially reducing the need for them to seek law firms for services such as the drafting of legal contracts.

In addition, the research programme, to be carried out by the Singapore Management University (SMU) School of Law, could result in Singapore becoming a pioneer in creating a working domain-specific language (DSL) for law.

DSL is a type of programming language used for a specific purpose.

This foundational technology is also expected to improve the efficiency of Singapore's legal and regulatory services, should it be adopted industrywide.

SMU has been given \$15 million by the National Research Foundation (NRF) to helm the five-year research programme in computational law, which started in January.

SMU has hired Mr Wong Meng Weng as the programme's principal investigator. He is co-founder of Legalese, a local legal tech start-up. His co-founder Alexis Chun will also be involved in the programme.

Other investigators include staff of both SMU's School of Law and School of Information Systems. They include the law school's dean, Professor Goh Yihan, as well as three other law academics: Assistant Professor Lim How Khang, Assistant Professor Lau Kwan Ho and lecturer Jerrold Soh.

The idea to create a DSL for law started with an exploration about the future of the legal industry, and what it means to be a lawyer today, Ms Chun told The Straits Times.

"In a world that is increasingly being built by software, you are going to find yourself in situations where, in law, the bottleneck are human beings rather than machines," she added. Ms Chun also said that while other universities have explored the concept of computational law, these were largely confined to the publication of academic papers.

The reason is either funding had dried up or there was no industry partner keen to develop the concept further, she said.

In contrast, SMU's research programme has the Government's support through the NRF's funds.

This is also important for translating legislation into code, said Mr Wong, as the Government is a

source of law and would, therefore, have a certain interpretation of existing statutes.

In developing the DSL, SMU will use real-life problems with commercial issues, as these usually involve legal principles that overlap in many areas of the law and are applicable in other countries.

The programme will come under

the new Centre for Computational Law, which will be operational at SMU's School of Law next month, with Assistant Professor Lim as its centre director.

The centre will also house various projects on the development and transfer of technology to the legal industry. The research programme will also involve undergraduates

from SMU's pilot Bachelor of Science (Law and Computing) course, which will start in August.

It is the first such course in Singapore to produce graduates in both law and computing disciplines for support roles in the legal industry, among other jobs.

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Working on the five-year research programme in computational law are (from left) Professor Goh Yihan, dean of Singapore Management University School of Law; Ms Alexis Chun and Mr Wong Meng Weng, co-founders of local legal tech start-up Legalese; and Assistant Professor Lau Kwan Ho and Assistant Professor Lim How Khang from SMU School of Law. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY