

# Grads must be creative thinkers: New NUS law dean

He wants students to engage in deep debates, and have soft skills to work with various people

BY AMELIA TAN

PROFESSOR Simon Chesterman has been named the new dean of the National University of Singapore (NUS) law school after more than 60 candidates were considered for the job.

His appointment takes effect on Jan 1 next year.

The 39-year-old Australian, currently the law school's vice-dean of graduate studies, joined NUS in 2007 as director of the New York University (NYU) School of Law Singapore Programme.

At a press conference yesterday, he outlined what he wanted to achieve. He said NUS needs to ensure that its graduates are not just good technical lawyers, but also creative thinkers with the soft skills to work with people from different backgrounds.

"If you just lecture to our students here, they are all very bright, they will understand what you say and they work out how to be examined. But if you want them to challenge you, you need to draw them out."

To encourage students to question and engage in deep debates on legal issues, the NUS law school will be infusing knowledge of legal systems in different countries and legal theories across the entire curriculum.

These topics are currently taught as separate modules.

The school is also in talks with top schools in China to form partnerships for student exchanges and research.

More opportunities will also be offered for students to do pro bono work, so that they learn the law's impact on the less privileged. The school is also looking at attracting Singaporean students who want to pursue an overseas law education to come to NUS instead.

Prof Chesterman said he plans to increase the research done by faculty and do more to promote their work around the world.

He noted that new research centres, such as the Centre for Asian Legal Studies, which will open next year in NUS, will help boost the global profile of the university and Singapore.

He takes over from Professor Tan Cheng Han, 46, who has headed the NUS law school for 10 years and is the longest-serving dean.

Prof Tan, who will continue to teach and do research at the school, is credited with transforming it into one with a global outlook through partnerships with overseas institutions like NYU.

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## A NEW PERSPECTIVE

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Prof Chesterman, 39, is currently the NUS law school's vice-dean of graduate studies. His appointment as dean will take effect from Jan 1 next year. ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

bring fresh ideas and new energy to the school and has the confidence and support of my colleagues and the student community," he said.

Prof Chesterman said he was asked if he would be interested to be considered for the role when the previous search for a dean started in 2008. But he declined as he did not feel ready.

He was new at NUS, had not yet achieved full professorship and wanted to focus on the NYU-NUS law programme, which he was running and was up for renewal.

But he felt ready to be considered

when the search for a dean started last year. He said: "The reasons not to run had disappeared. Then I started thinking about why I might want to do this. And I suppose the first thing is that I've enjoyed building institutions."

He added: "It's got the reputation of being the best law school in Asia."

He is not the first foreigner to head the NUS law school. For example, British professor Geoffrey W. Bartholomew headed it from 1966 to 1968.

NUS provost Tan Eng Chye said a search committee identified about 60 possible candidates from countries such as

## Wealth of legal experience

BORN and raised in Melbourne, Professor Simon Chesterman graduated with a first-class honours degree in the arts and law from the University of Melbourne.

He pursued a PhD in international law at the University of Oxford through a Rhodes Scholarship, and has lectured at top universities, including Oxford and France's Sciences Po.

He is a senior fellow at the University of Melbourne and the Institute for International Law and Justice at the New York University School of Law.

Prof Chesterman, who specialises in international law and intelligence, has extensive international experience, including stints with the United Nations in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

His work in Asia includes being the founding editor of the Asian Journal of International Law and holding the post of deputy secretary-general of the Asian Society of International Law.

He speaks Mandarin, which he picked up as a secondary school student; he also learnt Latin and French in school.

He is married to President Tony Tan Keng Yam's daughter Patricia, whom he met while they were studying in Oxford. The couple have two young children.

the United States, Britain and Australia. Internally, Prof Chesterman was chosen from three potential nominees.

Prof Tan said: "Given his international credentials and his keenness in research, especially in the area of intelligence and international law, Prof Chesterman has the necessary experience and drive to make one of the top law schools in Asia even better."

NUS law school takes in about 250 undergraduates a year. The Singapore Management University also offers law programmes.

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