SMU’s law school to open its doors next year

By DANIEL BUENAS

[SINGAPORE] Singapore Management University (SMU) hopes to welcome its first cohort of law students in August next year, but incumbent National University of Singapore (NUS) does not see the proposed new law school as a threat.

SMU submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Education (MOE) to set up a law school late last year, and the government announced yesterday that it had given the university in-principle approval to proceed with the project.

The move is aimed at adding diversity and competition to the legal education landscape, as well as at stemming the falling number of practising lawyers here.

Opening a new law school was one of the recommendations made by a committee set up in December last year to review the supply of lawyers in Singapore. The committee proposed a second law school here to add an estimated 90 more students a year.

“The details of the SMU Law School and its enrolment will be finalised in the next few months between the MOE, the Ministry of Law and SMU,” the Ministry of Law said in a statement yesterday.

SMU president Professor Howard Hunter said the university hoped to leverage on its existing strengths to offer a programme that would add to the legal education landscape. “We are excited to have the opportunity to start a new law school,” Prof Hunter said.

SMU already has a law department with 15 professors — part of its Lee Kong Chian School of Business — that offers law modules for students pursuing business degrees. The university teaches about 14 law courses a semester, and about 150 students are now doing law as a major.

Despite the increasingly competitive educational landscape in Singapore, NUS Law School dean Professor Tan Cheng Han does not view the new law school as a threat. “NUS competes globally with other excellent law schools from the UK, North America and the Asia-Pacific, thus it is used to competition whether domestic or international,” Prof Tan said.

The new school will be a boon to the local law industry, given the current shortfall of lawyers in Singapore, he believes. “A typical NUS graduate is sought after by both local and international law firms. In fact, foreign law firms have indicated that they would like to attract more NUS graduates,” he said.

“With the setting up of a new law school in SMU, many bright applicants who would otherwise have to pursue their law degree outside Singapore will now have an opportunity to study locally. Singapore can benefit greatly from having two law schools and NUS looks forward to working with SMU.”

According to Prof Tan, NUS Law School has been steadily increasing its intake each year. In 2001, the intake was 150 students. This year, the number has grown to 240, with more than 1,000 applicants competing for those places.

“NUS is looking at opening up more places to allow more bright applicants to pursue their law degree in Singapore,” Prof Tan said.

To remain competitive, the school has been collaborating with other top foreign universities to offer double degree programmes, such as its New York University-NUS double master’s programme.

“NUS has also in the pipeline a new double degree programme in collaboration with a leading North American law school,” Prof Tan said, without providing further details.

“We believe that double degree programmes in law will become more important and popular because the law profession which started out as being almost domestic is becoming a globalised profession,” he added. “Future lawyers must have working knowledge of the laws of other jurisdictions to survive and thrive in an increasingly more globalised world.”