Moves to boost S’pore as legal service hub

Setting up of 2nd law school, allowing hiring of top foreign lawyers among measures

By WEELI-EN
[SINGAPORE] The government would introduce sweeping measures to boost the supply of lawyers, in a bid to position Singapore as a world-class centre for legal services.

Among moves aimed at making the market more attractive, it is getting its share of this fast-growing global market:

• A second local law school will be established.

• More Singaporean graduates of overseas law schools will be allowed to practise here.

• And local firms will be allowed to hire top foreign lawyers.

Announcing the moves yesterday, Deputy Prime Minister S Jayakumar said: “With globalisation, there is a lot more international and cross-border work to be tapped. Singapore has to keep up with the changes and, more importantly, be quick to seize new opportunities to ensure that the legal services sector continues to effectively support Singapore’s plans for economic growth.”

Prof Jayakumar said that while Singapore’s overall services exports have grown two-fold in the past 10 years, legal services exports have surged six times. The reason: A huge increase in cross-border legal transactions, spurred by strong economic growth in China and India.

International dispute resolution, in particular, has enormos potential. And Singapore has many advantages — such as being a major English language — that it should leverage on, Prof Jayakumar said.

“Singapore will focus on the goal of becoming an exporter of international arbitration services, where lawyers and arbitrators from Singapore are engaged to act in disputes originating from all over the world,” he said.

To help achieve this vision, the government set up a committee last year to review the supply of lawyers. And it said yesterday it has accepted the committee’s key recommendations.

The committee has said the local sector should aim for an increase of about 140-150 professionals each year from 2010 until 2015. This is on top of the annual intake of 230 at the National University of Singapore Faculty of Law and output of 90 from 35 approved foreign universities.

Prof Jayakumar said the current local supply of lawyers is insufficient to meet strong demand.

“The significant attrition figures in the local bar are a clear indication of this, as more and more of our highly sought-after lawyers are being enticed into foreign firms and multinational companies,” he said.

To increase the supply of lawyers, the government has granted in-principle approval to Singapore Management University to set up a law school. And the existing NUS law School will increase its student intake. Also, Singaporeans and permanent residents who graduate from an approved foreign university with at least second-class lower-di-

vision honours — as opposed to second-class upper — will be allowed to practise law — provided they have three years relevant work experience or are qualified as solicitors in Hong Kong or England and Wales. They will also be interviewed by the Board of Legal Education which will consider factors such as their academic results and work experience.

The number of approved foreign universities may also be increased from the current 35, under free trade or economic co-operation agreements.

In what is seen by some as a controversial move, local law firms will be allowed to hire outstanding foreign lawyers to help them grow and compete regionally.

These hotshots will be allowed to practise Singapore law in prescribed areas such as banking, fi-
nances and other business.

The Law Society has already expressed reservations. “While the government’s assurance that quality must not be compromised is of comfort, the society remains concerned about how this will work in practice,” it said yesterday.

It also expressed concern about using limited licences to practise, as an alternative to the traditional path of admission by the Supreme Court and regulation via practising certificates issued by the Supreme Court on application through the society.

The society said it would prefer that outstanding foreign lawyers seeking a home in Singapore be admitted under Section 7 of the Legal Profession Act.

Under this, the Board of Legal Education can approve foreign lawyers who apply to become qualified lawyers and admit them in Singapore be admitted under Section 7 of the Legal Profession Act.

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