New law school to raise supply of lawyers

SMU starts course next August; NUS to up intake; casing of rules for grads from foreign universities

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A SECOND law school will open at the Singapore Management University (SMU) next year, while the National University of Singapore (NUS) will increase its intake of law students, in an attempt to boost the number of lawyers in the country.

The new school will take in its first batch of about 90 students in August next year. At the same time, NUS law faculty will also raise its annual enrolment from 220 to about 250 students.

The requirement for graduates from recognised foreign universities to practise here has also been lowered to a second-lower honours degree — although they will have to fulfil a host of stringent requirements.

Between 1997 and last year, about 300 law graduates were unable to practise because of the lower grade of their overseas degrees.

These recommendations were submitted to the Law Ministry last month by the third Committee on the Supply of Lawyers, which was headed by then Attorney-General Chan Sek Keong, who is now the Chief Justice.

The committee estimates that these changes will add 150 lawyers to the Bar each year from 2010 onwards.

Yesterday, Law Minister S. Jayakumar accepted the initiatives, saying they were necessary to bridge the widening gap between demand and supply plaguing the profession.

The number of lawyers has dipped slightly in recent years. There are now about 3,490 lawyers, compared with 3,537 in 2000.

Professor Jayakumar said there would be an increasing demand for lawyers in the next decade and the current crop was insufficient to meet this need.

But he insisted that quality would not be compromised for the sake of quantity.

The Law Ministry will only allow those holding a second-lower honours degree to practise if they have worked in the local industry for three years. They will also have to undergo an interview with the Board of Legal Education.

An in-house legal counsel working in Singapore who obtained a lower grade degree from a university in the United Kingdom five years ago, described the changes as “too little too late”. She told The Straits Times she was no longer interested in practising.

The Law Society, though, welcomed the changes, saying that firms have reported a shortage of young lawyers.

Details of the new SMU law school are still being worked out, although the university submitted a proposal in December.

Prof Jayakumar, a former dean of the NUS law faculty, hopes the SMU model will not be an “exact replica” of NUS.

He said: “I hope they will have different approaches to methods of learning. It would be dull if it were exactly a clone of the NUS law school.”

Prof Jayakumar also said they had opted to open a second law school instead of expanding the NUS one because of NUS’ limited resources.

NUS law dean, Professor Tan Cheng Han, said taking in over 300 students a year would lower the quality of education. “We do not want to become a factory which mass-produces lawyers.”

This year, the NUS law school had to turn away about 800 applicants.

SMU president Howard Hunter, himself a former Law Dean at Emory University in the United States, would not say how different the new school would be from NUS, but it is likely to offer specialised areas of law relating to the university’s existing strengths in the finance and information systems sector.