Another angle to lawyers

As with the doctor shortage, Singapore's famously calibrating manpower planners intend to bump up home growth and tap traditional foreign sources to meet demand for more lawyers. The National University of Singapore is to increase its law enrolment by about 15 per cent, to some 250 candidates. Exciting is the prospect of Singapore Management University starting a law school next year with a launch class of about 100 students. With its stress on corporate and financial legal training, coupled with its reputation for innovative teaching methods, the tradition-bound NUS law faculty will have to get off its perch. All told, the enrolment expansion will add some 150 lawyers to the pool after the gestation period, which the Law Ministry reckons is about five years. As well, foreign lawyers specialising in corporate work will be permitted restricted entry to join local firms with Asia-wide operations. But, for all the rising demand for legal skills that the nation's importance in corporate deal-making, logistics and trade requires, the additional input cannot be good for more than a reasonably brief period.

It is accepted that organic growth has its limitations, as uncontrolled expansion in enrolment must come at the expense of quality. Planners should be taking a hard look at the incidence of entry- and middle-level lawyers leaving the profession to see if the leakage of trained manpower can be stemmed. Numbers have been rising over the years, more lawyers are switching careers. The Law Ministry's last census on the profession crunched respondents' reasons for quitting down to a few standard grievances that have not changed through the years. These are the long hours, unrewarding pay and stress. A revealing finding was that lawyers who had given up practising worked an average 49 hours a week at their new occupations compared with the 60 hours they had been putting in. Shop-talk among younger lawyers is thick with tales of unreasonable client demands. Law firms are a hide-bound hierarchical business, but this cannot be taken as evidence that many or most practices are running their young lawyers into the ground as a matter of professional tradition. But if there is justification for these durable complaints, senior lawyers owe a duty of care to their profession to reform work and pay practices. They get to keep the fresh talent they need to increase billings, and the profession will be spared avoidable loss of ready-to-use expertise.