He served as vice dean for 15 years at one of the top two American law schools — Harvard. Now he is ready to stamp his mark as the new dean of Singapore's second law school.

The Singapore Management University (SMU) announced yesterday the appointment of Professor David N Smith, who will become law dean on Aug 1, three weeks before classes begin for the first time at its School of Law.

The 70-year-old American, who also graduated from Harvard and taught there for more than 25 years, is a specialist in transnational corporations and foreign investment.

At a press conference at SMU, he outlined the biggest challenge facing the fledgling school — and it is not competing against National University of Singapore's (NUS) more established Faculty of Law.

"When I speak to law firm partners around the world, or CEOs of companies, and I ask 'what do you look for most in your lawyer', they almost invariably say, 'the ability to solve problems'," he said, and added that even Harvard does not spend enough time teaching "real problem solving, in context".

He wants SMU's law school to teach "global thinking skills" and hopes to make teaching more interactive.

On competition with NUS, Prof Smith said he is looking forward to more cooperation, for example, through having an exchange of speakers from both universities to address students or faculty.

"I expect there'll be very substantial intellectual exchange," he said, noting that both schools will have different philosophies.

"Our approach is more interdisciplinary, particularly with regards to the relationship between law and business management," he said.

"There are enough good students in Singapore to fill several law schools," added Prof Smith, who spent the past nine years heading various schools and faculties in universities in Hong Kong and Macau.

For its inaugural intake, SMU has received approval to expand capacity from 90 to 110 students. It has admitted 118 students so far, of whom 19 are existing students.

- TODAY/50