SMU aims to produce lawyers with a difference

Politics, ethics, even work-life balance to be in curriculum

BY SANDRA DAVIE
Education Correspondent

NINETY students will enter the new Singapore Management University (SMU) law school this August to be trained as corporate and commercial lawyers.

When they leave four years later, the university hopes they will be more than just lawyers.

To achieve this goal, it will devote one-third of its curriculum to non-law subjects. And it will follow the American style of teaching in small group seminars.

SMU yesterday said the 11 compulsory non-law courses – which include financial accounting, Asian modern history, politics, ethics and responsibility as well as how to achieve work and family life balance – are aimed at helping students understand the context and environment within which law functions.

One way the SMU programme will differ from the one offered at the National University of Singapore (NUS) – the only other law course here – is that students will have to undertake a 10-week internship with a law firm or government legal agency.

This is not a requirement at NUS, although about three-quarters of law students there do so anyway to help them land jobs.

Yesterday, while releasing details of the new course, SMU dons spoke at length on how their students will be taught differently from those at NUS.

Law school interim dean Low Kee Yang said that, as in other SMU courses, there will be no lectures and tutorials. Students will instead be taught via seminars in groups of about 30.

"Students will be active participants in their own learning and be engaged constantly in question-and-answer sessions and group presentations," said Associate Professor Low.

"It is demanding, but it will train them to be mentally agile, communicate well and be able to work in teams."

Contacted by The Straits Times, the NUS law school said, however, its students spend up to 15 per cent of their curriculum time taking non-law courses.

It added that it has also adopted the seminar-style teaching approach, especially for its third- and fourth-year students.

The tutorial group size for first- and second-year students can be as small as 13 in the NUS law school, which takes in 240 students a year.

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SMU said the fees will be announced only in a few weeks' time, but hinted that they are likely to be higher than the $7,500 paid by its other students because of higher faculty salaries and a lower student-teacher ratio.

Nevertheless, some students are already eyeing a place.

SMU first-year accounting student Ng Zheng Han, 21, is thinking of transferring to the law course. He said: "The job prospects will be brighter for corporate lawyers, especially an SMU-trained one," he said.

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