Law schools cool to three-year course idea

Proposed shorter course 'leaves less room for internships, projects and broad-based learning'  

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FOUR years is just right, three years is too short.  
That was the two law schools' view in response to the idea of trimming a year off local law degree courses.  
The idea was mooted on Thursday by the Committee to Develop the Singapore Legal Sector, which released a series of recommendations to reform legal education here.  
The panel also suggested, among other things, a regular review of the curricula in both universities' law schools in conjunction with the proposed new Institute of Legal Education, and mandatory continuing education for lawyers.  
As part of the restructuring of the present legal education system, it also envisages a Vocational Training Course to replace the current two courses that new law graduates undergo to qualify for practice.  
To attract more teaching talent, it wants greater autonomy for law schools to set their fees and revise the pay scales of the better lecturers to reflect marketplace changes.  

It also wants to increase the intake of foreign law graduates through a graduate law programme here and recognise a greater number of good foreign law school degrees.  
To help reduce the attrition rate, it wants to encourage greater work-life balance in law firms.  
On the three-year proposal, Singapore Management University president Howard Hunter said yesterday that he did not think it was "a good idea as the students here were quite young and relatively inexperienced."  
He found the rest of the report very good and the committee had an "excellent road map for the future of the legal services sector".

A BROAD-BASED APPROACH  
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PROF TAN CHENG HAN, NUS law dean  
The National University of Singapore's Law dean, Professor Tan Cheng Han, said its four-year course had significant advantages.  
The Committee had felt that shortening the course would push forward the development of Singapore's legal talent pool. It proposed that some of the current practical subjects be taken out.  
These could form part of a post-graduate Vocational Training Course in a future Institute of Legal Education, which would administer this course leading to an exam for entry into the Singapore Bar.  
The committee's report has been accepted in principle by the Government.  
Prof Hunter said that law courses in Australia are mostly five years, while in the American system, they last seven years.  
"Three years is too short. Our programmes include internships, workshops and projects which entail experiential learning as well," he said.  
Giving his "preliminary view", Prof Tan explained that "given the present legal landscape, the practice of law has a significant cross-border element".  
Law students must be familiar with more than local law.  
"In addition, very few law educators today believe that the study of law should focus on law only, and additional time is needed to infuse the law curriculum with perspectives from other relevant disciplines," he added.  
But Prof Tan said he was prepared to "keep an open mind". He will be convening a Faculty meeting on the panel's proposal.  
When asked about another key concern raised by the committee - encouraging law graduates to practise law instead of switching to other careers - Prof Tan said that "many lawyers who left law firms go 'in-house' as legal counsel so it is unclear how much 'wastage' there is".

He said: "If some go on to work in other areas, I don't think this is wastage, because a legal education trains you for more than law, as is so clearly demonstrated in the United States, where many top policy makers and corporate leaders are legally trained."  
The committee, in its report, had expressed concern that the number of young lawyers - those with less than seven years' service - had dropped by one third from 2001 to 2006; even though the NUS had increased its annual cohort to 200 per year since 2001.  
Said Prof Tan: "The more fundamental issue is whether it is time to re-examine the policy of trying to match intake numbers with anticipated demand. This may no longer be an efficient policy."

"Since legally trained people are in demand outside the law, we need not worry that too many legally trained people will lead to unemployed or unproductive lawyers."  

Recommended reforms  
• Law schools should consider three-year courses, especially for those who do not want to practise.  
• Course content should be reviewed regularly with the Institute of Legal Education. Both schools should have the same core subjects.  
• A new Institute of Legal Education should replace the Board of Legal Education. It would focus on postgraduate education, vocational training and continuing legal education.  
• A Vocational Training Course should replace the Practical Law course and Diploma in Singapore Law course. The former would eventually become the second gatekeeper to entry into the legal profession. It will enable graduates from all over the world to sit for an exam and qualify to practice here.  
• Compulsory continuing education for all lawyers.  
• There should be a better balance between work and life to reduce the dropout rate of young lawyers.  

In releasing the report on Thursday, Deputy Prime Minister and Law Minister S Jayakumar said the Government will contemplate a common Bar exam for all who want to practise in Singapore.  
"But this is something that we will consider after the steps have been put in place," he said.  
Mr Kampannap Chettiar, the principal of Singapore's largest private law school, said he was overjoyed with the prospect. He said: "This is a radical change compared to 10 years ago and opens up more choices for those wanting to be lawyers, including private study students."

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