Law school gets real

As new SMU course offers non-law content, NUS also broadens its law curriculum

WHEN the opening of a second local law school was announced last year, it signalled the end of a 50-year monopoly for the National University of Singapore (NUS).

On Friday, as details of the new school were revealed at a press conference, legal education here got primed not just for diversity and competition, but for quite a bit of change.

The School of Law at the Singapore Management University (SMU) will offer a four-year curriculum with a significant proportion of non-law content, as this newspaper first reported last October. The final ratio has been set at 70:30, or 25 law courses out of 36 courses in all.

While that is comparable to the top Australian law schools or American law colleges, according to SMU president Howard Hunter, it marks quite an entrance for Singapore's second law degree.

The programme at NUS is about 95 per cent steeped in law courses.

Said SMU School of Law interim dean Low Kee Yang: "In this current landscape of legal education in Singapore, a curriculum with a significant non-law content is a milestone."

However, even before SMU admits its first law students, it seems to have opened the door for change for legal education as a whole. NUS is now preparing to broaden its law curriculum.

"We are ... likely to allow (students) to spend slightly more than a semester reading a Minor in another discipline relevant to the study of law — for example, business, finance and economics," said NUS Faculty of Law dean Tan Cheng Han, in a letter to NUS law alumnus three weeks ago.

This is separate from the double-degree programmes in law and another discipline that exist at NUS, and which SMU will also offer to its students with its new school.

The effect of SMU's entrance could possibly extend to grading methods, with Professor Tan noting the "rich variety of assessment methods" at NUS. At SMU's law school, not more than 50 per cent of each course will be examination-based.

The most distinctive characteristic, though, about SMU's law curriculum, is its broad-based nature, with an emphasis on the business world, in line with SMU's existing focus on finance. For example, the law school's non-law courses range from introduction to physical science to financial accounting — all of which will be compulsory.

In particular, the university highlighted a course described as "Business Study Mission", whereby students visit an overseas country to study its business and regulatory environment, and a subject on modern Asian history, politics and economics. Said Assoc Prof Low: "Together (they) give students a keen understanding of the complexities of the global landscape and excellent preparation to work in the region."

He added: "The non-law component of our curriculum is specially designed, meaning that we don't let students decide they want to do poetry. The law-related courses within the curriculum are very carefully chosen."

While Prof Hunter expects that graduates of the new school are most likely to become transactional lawyers in corporate and commercial practice, he said this was to be expected in most law schools.

Senior Counsel Wong Meng Meng was optimistic about SMU's curriculum. "You don't want to produce corporate lawyers who just look at documents, deal with people who come in nicely dressed in ties and pinstriped suits and all that, and forget what life is all about," he told reporters at the press conference.

The only constraint SMU faced in planning its law programme was the intake size, which will start at 90 this August and rise to 120 from next year. SMU will beef up its 16-strong faculty to about 40 by 2010.

NUS is also increasing its intake size this year, from 220 to 240 students, to meet the needs of the industry.