An instant success for SMU

University's new law school a hit among applicants

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WHEN the Singapore Management University (SMU) was planning its new law school last year, its first proposal was to offer a strictly double-degree programme for all students. And it had wanted to keep the annual intake to only 45 students.

But, that plan was nixed after the Third Committee on the Supply of Lawyers came back with its report. Far more lawyers were needed in Singapore, and the concern was that too many graduates might not necessarily practice law if they all had double degrees. Although the inaugural intake has more than doubled to 99 and the allotment for students doing double degrees is 24 per cent, including 16 places for existing students, the university was spot-on about what would be a big lure for students.

Almost 470 students out of about 1,250 applicants for its law school are gunning for a double degree, be it law and ac-OUNTANCY, law and business management, or other combinations.

SMU president Howard Hunter still expects a number of SMU's future law graduates to go into the wider corporate world rather than the courtroom, due to the inextricable link between business and law.

"You can't operate in the business world without some knowledge of how legal systems operate," said Professor Hunter, one of the prime movers for the establishment of a full-fledged law school from SMU's law department.

Having first discussed the idea with former SMU president Ron Frank in 2002, Prof Hunter, a law don, told TODAY the decision to take the step up was simple."If you're going to have a strong legal faculty, it would be good if students can actually do law," he said.

While the National University of Singapore has been teaching law for half a century, SMU has done well to sell its proposition to students, in part due to a "happy confluence of events".

Said Prof Hunter: "There's a tremendous demand for legal education, a demand both among student applicants ... and a demand in the marketplace for well-trained lawyers." But the university has not been resting on its laurels. For one thing, it moved quickly to get former Chief Justice Yong Pung How to chair its advisory committee, and the latter has been "extraordinarily generous with his ideas", Prof Hunter said.

"He has a room in the law faculty and comes frequently. He has tea with the faculty and discusses issues and cases taught by the faculty. He's become like a mentor and a great source of cordial advice. He's been a tremendous ambassador for us," he said.

Since the law school's curriculum was confirmed in January, the university has also been busy building ties with the industry, for example, through student awards.

The latest addition to its pool of book prizes is the Portcullis Trust Prize, worth $1,500, for the top student in the core course of Law of Equity and Trusts, made possible by a $15,000 donation over 10 years by Portcullis Trustnet Singapore.

Student Nathanael Lim, who has accepted a place at SMU, called it a "great reassuring to know we have the support of the private sector". It was the SMU approach to legal studies -- a "very corporate touch" -- that attracted him to the new school.

Fellow Lee Kong Chian scholarship recipient Jo Tay added: "Law, by itself, is a profession that has a lot of gravity, requires a lot of intellectual rigour. SMU gives it a lot of spunk."

For example, the interview process includes a mock court set-up, whereby applicants argue on opposing sides, according to director of undergraduate admissions Alan Goh.

As the deadline for acceptance comes to a close in two weeks, SMU has had a "happy headache" in selecting its pioneer batch, said Mr Goh.