SMU’s edge: Lawyers trained to be humane and balanced

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A THIRD law school in Singapore? Once a preposterous notion to some academics because of the island’s relatively tiny size, it might just become a reality as the Republic continues to prosper.

This is the opinion of Professor Michael Philip Furmston, an internationally-renowned authority on contract and commercial law and the dean of the Singapore Management University’s (SMU) School of Law.

His conclusion, he says, is based on the similarities between the Republic and his homeland, England.

“Although Singapore and England differ in size, the two have a lot in common, especially in terms of the nature of their economies,” said the gregarious 74-year-old, who took over the job last July. The school is only the second here after the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Faculty of Law, which was established in 1956.

“There are currently about twice as many lawyers per head in England as they are in Singapore, but at some point I would expect some pressure for more lawyers as the economy grows.”

And there can be only two options: Either the existing schools increase their intake or a new institution sets shop.

And that could become a reality in the next 10 years but, for the moment, Prof Furmston — who has taught at prestigious universities in Birmingham, Belfast, Oxford and Bristol since 1957 — is more interested in turning the SMU School of Law into an institute of reckoning.

Its pioneer batch of 117 students started on Aug 20 last year. Although its planned intake was initially 90, SMU received approval from the Ministry of Education to increase the number after receiving an overwhelming response from candidates with impressive academic results. He believes they were attracted to the school’s varied curriculum.

“Most English law schools offer three-year degrees where the students do nothing but law. At SMU, it is 70-per-cent law and 30-per-cent other subjects like ethics and social responsibility. We also want the students to do science and modern history.”

Students are also expected to go through a 10-week compulsory internship, as well as serve 80 hours of community service or a social service internship.

This practice was instituted before his arrival but he considers it “a plus”, as good lawyers needed to understand other things for “a modern balanced career”.

Asked what sets SMU School of Law apart from the competition, the father of 10 said: “What we are hoping to do here is not just produce people who know the rules but also to turn out students who are intelligent, humane and honest.”