

## Singapore acts to lure overseas-trained lawyers back home

SINGAPORE: Major changes are on the cards for Singapore's legal education system.

The changes are aimed at ensuring Singapore has an adequate supply of local lawyers who can compete against global competition and to strengthen Singapore's position as a key regional legal education hub.

Law Minister K Shanmugam announced the changes in Parliament on Friday.

In hoping to attract overseas-trained Singapore lawyers to come back and practise law at home, the Law Ministry will abolish the one-year-long Diploma in Singapore Law course.



Singapore's Supreme Court building

Mr Shanmugam noted that the course, which is a requirement for all returning lawyers, has proven to be a disadvantage as lawyers feel they can pick up most of what is taught during the practice.

Hence, from June this year, such lawyers will be offered an optional three-month conversion course.

To enhance legal training, measures include:

- revamping the Practice Law Course;
- replacing the pupillage system with training contracts, with the intention of putting the onus on law firms to ensure that trainees have a constructive and structured learning programme;
- the possibility of making continuing legal education mandatory to ensure practising lawyers are up to date on any changes to the law and are familiar with emerging areas of law.

To ensure a steady supply of lawyers, graduates with a Second Class (Lower) degree from approved universities will be admitted to the Singapore Bar without the two-year minimum legal experience requirement.

In addition, the Singapore Management University's Law School will put in place additional measures to add to the pool of lawyers. The first batch of graduates from SMU will join the industry in 2011.

The NUS Law Faculty will also increase its intake from 220 to 250 students a year.

Together, Mr Shanmugam said, these moves will result in an almost 70 per cent increase in the number of local law graduates in a few years' time - from 220 to 370 annually.

He added that the incoming Qualifying Foreign Law Practices (QFLPs) will also bring in more lawyers as they consolidate their regional offshore work here.



To oversee the legal education in Singapore, a new statutory board - tentatively called the Institute for Legal Education - will be set up.

Mr Shanmugam said: "Most essential for a vibrant legal sector are good quality lawyers. Therefore, ensuring that legal education and training is top notch is extremely important".

The minister also gave an update on moves to free up legal services in Singapore.

The Law Ministry noted that despite the current economic crisis, there is potential in the medium term for the legal sector to expand in certain areas.

One area is arbitration, as Singapore is fast becoming an arbitration venue of choice. By mid-2009, Singapore will have the Maxwell Chambers to house arbitration hearings under one roof.

Mr Shanmugam said: "Our advantage is our connectivity and world class infrastructure, our judicial philosophy in respect to arbitration and being accessible at a much lower expense than some of the other popular arbitration centres."

Another good sign is that international law firms have been setting up new offices in Singapore in recent months. In the past four months alone, four new firms opened offices here, one of them among the Global Top 40.

Another two firms have already registered with the Attorney-General's Chambers and have announced plans to open new offices in Singapore.