

MINISTRY OF LAW

Entry eased for overseas law grads

Diploma course axed;
2nd Lower honours
grads get shot to practise

By K.C. VIJAYAN
LAW CORRESPONDENT

OVERSEAS law graduates wanting to practise law here will no longer have to go through a one-year Diploma in Singapore Law course.

Known as DipSing, the course was introduced in 1997 to ensure that graduates from approved foreign universities are in tune with the judicial and legal systems if they intend to practise here.

But lawyer-MPs who spoke during the debate on the Law Ministry's budget questioned its usefulness as it often repeats course content. Several said it was also a deterrent to Singaporeans who were keen to return to practise.

Responding, Law Minister K. Shanmugam announced that the DipSing would be scrapped and replaced by an optional three-month conversion course.

Those taking the course have to sit for an examination as part A of the Bar exam at the end of it. But graduates who want to take the exam without going through the conversion course can do so.

Another move announced affects law graduates from recognised overseas universities with a Second Lower honours degree. They can also get to practise so long as they pass the Bar exams.

Previously they had to gain two years of experience before being able to apply to be admitted to the Bar here.

Both moves were among changes to the legal education system and admission criteria revealed by Mr Shanmugam when he responded to MPs. A comprehensive policy and regulatory framework was necessary to support Singapore's goal of becoming a legal hub, he said.

Changes announced previously to help in this regard included granting licences to six internationally renowned law firms, and developing Singapore as an international arbitration centre. A legal education framework was also vital and yesterday's changes were in line with this.

Aside from scrapping the DipSing, he

Key changes

- Diploma in Singapore Law scrapped and replaced by a shorter three-month conversion course, which is optional, leading to Part A of Bar exams.
- Practical law course, which runs for five months, revamped, leading to Part B of Bar exams.
- Pupillage replaced by training contracts – six months for local graduates and up to one year for foreign law graduates.
- Overseas law graduates with Second Lower honours allowed to take Bar

said a five-month-long Practical Law Course (PLC) will be revamped to provide more practical-based training to better prepare graduates for practice.

The law pupillage programme – where graduates spend time at law firms – will also be replaced with training contracts.

exams without additional hurdles.

- Continuing legal education to be compulsory for practising lawyers.
- Existing schemes for foreign lawyers to practise in restricted areas here will be reviewed, and the Corporate Practice Exam to be introduced to enhance corporate practice in law firms.
- Maxwell Chambers, a conservation building, renovated to become a first-class venue for international arbitration hearings.

The aim is for firms “to devise more meaningful Training Contracts for their trainees”, he said, noting that some pupils had little direct contact with their mentors under the current system.

Firms have to take on greater responsibility and have to ensure that trainees

“have a constructive and structured learning programme”. Local graduates will do a six-month stint at firms, while overseas students have to do it for up to a year.

Mr Shanmugam said with changes such as training contracts and new parts A and B of the Bar exam, graduates with Second Lower degrees could take the Bar exams without facing additional hurdles.

These moves – which the legal fraternity welcomed yesterday – would also help ensure an adequate supply of lawyers, he said to comments about a shortage.

He noted that by 2011, the pool of locally trained lawyers will increase by 70 per cent, from 220 a year to 370.

This will be when the first batch of Singapore Management University law students graduate. It also takes into account the increased intake of law students at the National University of Singapore.

A new body, tentatively known as the Institute of Legal Education, will co-ordinate, administer and supervise all initiatives and programmes relating to legal education.

vijayan@sph.com.sg