GRADUATES seeking to become lawyers in a career switch can now do an American-style law degree at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

This alternative route to practising law here, known as the Juris Doctor (JD) programme, can be done in 24 to 30 months. JDs are earned in the style they are obtained in the United States, as a postgraduate course after doing a bachelor's degree in some other discipline.

There are no bachelor's degree programmes in law in the US. On graduation, candidates can proceed to complete the Postgraduate Practical Law Course and a six-month training contract with a law firm for admission to the Singapore Bar.

Currently, the Bachelor of Laws is the only degree under the Legal Profession Act (LPA) that qualifies someone for practice in Singapore.

Procedural steps are expected to be taken to include the JD as a recognised degree for the purposes of the LPA, said an SMU spokesman.

In fact, the National University of Singapore is already in talks with the Law Ministry to change the nomenclature for its own postgraduate LLB degree programme to JD once the Act is amended, said its law dean, Professor Tan Cheng Han.

SMU law school dean Michael Furmston said yesterday that with the new programme, "SMU will be able to groom talent from a wider sphere of expertise who show competence and aptitude to be good lawyers".

It aims to lure engineering, computer science and other graduates who have either just completed their degrees or are in mid-career.

It also wants to attract law graduates from other countries, such as China and France, whose basic degrees may not be recognised here.

Applications close on May 15 for the $60,000 course and the first intake of 20 students will start sessions in August.

SMU will hold two public information sessions next month at its law school.

Details can be found at www.law.smu.edu.sg/jd/programme/information_session.asp