

# BREEDING A NEW KIND OF LEGAL EAGLE

**New law school's proposed approach to admissions, curriculum heralds change that Singapore is ripe for**

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THIS newspaper recently revealed that, under the four-year law degree programme that the Singapore Management University (SMU) has proposed, a law student could graduate with up to 40 per cent of his or her degree comprising non-law subjects. Students will also spend less time in the classroom.

This proposal has ruffled some feathers across the profession. Questions are being raised. Should a law student take so many non-law subjects? What does a student do with all that extra time? Will this unique education do Singapore's legal profession good?

Yet, this proposal represents what many legal professionals here have wanted to see in a second law school – something different from what the National University of Singapore's law school offers, and competition in the teaching and learning of law.

There is a growing school of thought here which feels that legal training needs to shift away from the mere process of acquiring legal knowledge. Ms Angeline Lee, president of the Singapore Corporate Counsel Association, expressed hope that legal training

would “go beyond merely preparing law graduates for legal practice in Singapore”.

She pointed out that more regional headquarters locating here would mean a need for more law graduates who have “an appreciation of how global businesses work”.

Likewise, some law professionals believe that legal training needs to focus more on legal thinking. In this approach, what matters is not the amount of time you spend in the classroom, but how effectively you use the time outside it to reflect on the law.

This can enable one to develop expertise in an area of law that one may not have studied in school. It is this skill that enabled some conveyancing lawyers to move to more lucrative areas of law, when their area of expertise faced a crunch some years ago.

But just how different is SMU's proposal? Associate Professor Victor Ramraj, vice-dean of the NUS Law School, said the school believes “in incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives into our law courses as much as possible, rather than simply making distinctions between law and other subjects”.

It has taken the different tack of introducing double degrees, including one in law and public policy to meet the needs of those aspiring to join the public

service. So, it seems that the SMU law school will simply take what NUS has been doing a step further.

Tied closely to this question of law curriculum is the appeal that SMU law school graduates will have. In the face of strong alumni links fostered by the NUS law school over the decades, it is clear that its new rival will not have it easy. Legal practitioners will need to be convinced that its law grad-

uates are of the same, if not better, calibre as those from NUS' law school.

Nevertheless, since its establishment, SMU has fostered close links with industry, which has enabled its graduates to secure positions of choice. SMU law graduates could thus have little difficulty in joining top companies.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that SMU graduates are different from other local graduates – partly due to the flexible admission criteria and the opportunities SMU has provided for students who would not normally be offered places by other local universities.

One result could be that the SMU law school will move away from primarily attracting students who do well at the GCE A Levels, or the top achievers of Temasek Polytechnic's diploma of law programme.

It may, in fact, accept more law diploma

holders who have demonstrated excellence in sports or other activities. Some places could also go to paralegals with excellent work experience but not necessarily the grades one normally needs for admission to law school. This, in part, could help loosen the “old school boys/girls culture” in the legal profession today.

Finally, there is also a political element associated with less classroom time that the SMU law school will need to factor in – a reason why one finds students in universities here spending more time in class than some of their counterparts overseas.

It will have to assure the authorities that less classroom time will not translate into more of its law students getting involved in activities that could threaten Singapore's stability, as active students with less classroom time did in the early days of Singapore's independence.

If SMU's proposal for its new law school is ruffling feathers across the legal profession, it's because few people cherish change. The legal education landscape in Singapore has certainly been long ripe for it.

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