Law in a globalised world

Law schools must rise to the challenge of a fast globalising legal system, says NUS law dean

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A CENTURIES-OLD profession, and the education of its practitioners, is on the cusp of immense change.

Listening to Professor Tan Cheng Han, dean of the National University of Singapore Law Faculty, it seems that lawyers will not be the same again.

While domestic law will still be of principal concern to lawyers, the globalisation of legal practice has arrived, and law schools need to be able to train the international lawyer.

“While a lot of law graduates have this notion that they will certainly practice domestic law, quite a big chunk of that practice will be offshore,” said Prof Tan.

This is especially true in an open economy like Singapore, which aims both to export its legal services and be a legal hub.

“So, our law graduates must leave law school with at least a working knowledge of different legal systems. Otherwise, you don’t have a starting point on which to build a regional practice,” he said.

While the study of comparative and international law may not necessarily help lawyers to hit the ground running in unfamiliar jurisdictions, he believes it does “sensitise them to the idea that there are approaches to law other than their own”.

At NUS, the law faculty has identified the legal traditions of China, India, Indonesia and Vietnam – “very important destinations for foreign investments” – for its students. And it is not just curriculum content that matters, though. The entire legal education landscape is changing, it seems.

“With globalisation, individual law schools cannot be doing everything for its students. We have ceased to be one-stop shops. To offer students the diversity needed in a fast changing world, we need to leverage off each others’ resources,” said Prof Tan, who predicts more alliances in research and teaching between the leading law schools of the world.

The NUS law faculty, itself, is about to make a major announcement of a new double degree programme with the law school at New York University (NYU). Soon, eligible students will be able to graduate with a Letters in Law (Bachelors) from NUS and a Letters in Law (Masters) from NYU within four years. This is in addition to the current joint LLM programme between the two universities.

On a broad level, collaboration between law schools “exposes students to a whole host of professors they normally wouldn’t have”, he said.

Plus, some schools are better in certain areas. “NYU, for example, is ahead of us in the curve in so far as the integration of interdisciplinary perspectives in law subjects are concerned,” said Prof Tan, who has put great emphasis on this at NUS.

As legal education becomes more international, it can also get more specialised and Prof Tan foresees this as a big challenge for law schools — how to afford students a wide menu of elective courses.

NUS now has 70 to 80 elective courses. Possibly in the works could be a new niche for law students — a double degree in law and the life sciences.

“We think it is logical and we hope the authorities also think so,” said Prof Tan.

If you have a question for Prof Tan on law as a field of study or a profession, email succeed@newstoday.com.sg and he will reply in Quiz Time next Monday.