NUS, Boston varsity in law degree tie-up

Faculty plans more partnerships to give students more exposure

BY AMELIA TAN

Law students at the National University of Singapore (NUS) will soon be able to earn a master's degree from Boston University (BU) on top of a first degree here.

Under a new programme, two final-year NUS law students will head to BU in August for a year to pursue a master’s in law. Selected BU law students can also spend a year at NUS and graduate with a master’s.

NUS law faculty dean Tan Cheng Han told The Straits Times that the BU programme is the first of six partnerships that the university hopes to forge with top overseas law schools, including those in Europe, over the next two years.

He declined to reveal names, but said talks with the other five schools are at an advanced stage.

A total of about 12 to 15 NUS students can get places at these six programmes each year. To get selected, they have to meet the requirements of the master’s of law programmes at the universities to which they are applying.

NUS law faculty has termed these programmes “student exchange plus” – students pay NUS law school tuition fees of about $9,400 a year when they are studying at the overseas schools, just like students in other exchange programmes.

But the bonus is, they also get to add a master’s degree to their credentials after a year abroad.

BU is the second overseas institution the NUS law school has worked with that offers its undergraduates a route to earning two degrees within four years.

In 2007, NUS law school inked a partnership with New York University’s (NYU) law school to allow selected final-year NUS law students to study at NYU for a year and get a master’s degree.

However, NUS students have to pay about US$46,000 ($58,500) for a year of tuition fees when they are at NYU, as the programme is not considered a student exchange.

So far, 13 NUS students have graduated from the NUS-NYU programme, while two are currently in their final semester in New York. Most of the students have landed jobs at large local law firms, the Attorney-General’s Chambers and the Supreme Court, said NUS law faculty assistant dean Wendy Tan.

Over the next two years, the law faculty will also send half of each cohort – now numbering 240 – on regular student exchange programmes, where they spend one to two semesters overseas but do not get a master’s degree.

Currently, about 40 per cent of each cohort take part in these programmes.

All these efforts are part of the faculty’s ambition to springboard the school into the league of the top law schools in the world, like Stanford, Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard.

Professor Tan said he sees greater global exposure for his students as a key strategy in achieving this aim, as the law profession is transforming from a domestic to a transnational one.

"Barriers are breaking down because of globalisation and international treaties. There are some of us who believe that in the future, there is going to be a lot more convergence and, therefore, in this kind of world, just exposing your students to domestic law alone is not enough," he said.

The NUS law faculty will also partner the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the World Bank to offer up to three fellowships from this year.

This will make NUS the first Asian university to offer fellowships with these organisations, which currently extend these opportunities only to elite American and European law schools like NYU, Yale and Oxford.

Students on the fellowships – which will take nine months to two years – will work at the ICJ in The Hague in the Netherlands and the World Bank in the United States, where they will do legal research and analysis.

Such tie-ups have benefited the likes of Mr James Choo, 26, a graduate of the NUS-NYU programme. He thinks the year he spent at the American university, where he specialised in US tax law, helped him land his current job as a tax lawyer at international law firm Baker & McKenzie.

He said: "Many of the clients I work with are US-based multinational companies. My background in US corporate tax law gives me a better understanding of the perspective the clients have when investing in Singapore."