Educating tomorrow's lawyers

Legal education should be about preparing graduates for a changing and dynamic world.

We need to give our students the tools not just to practise on day one but also in year 10, skills that will be useful through the varied career paths of modern law graduates. This is particularly true in Singapore, where the practice of law often involves cross-border work with lawyers and clients familiar with other traditions, notably the civil law as practised in Indonesia, China and elsewhere. Our graduates must also be familiar with arbitration and non-adversarial forms of dispute resolution.

A legal education should therefore comprise academic and professional components, each complementing the other. It should provide graduates with a sound understanding of general principles and doctrine. Those graduates should also have some appreciation of the contexts within which the law operates. And they should have professional skills and the ethics and values to practise law effectively and with honour.

In other words, graduates need to know what the law is, but also why it is the way it is, and how to serve the interests of their clients and uphold the rule of law.

The third question concerns the responsibilities of lawyers. Many students and practitioners acknowledge the privileged position that they occupy and spend a significant portion of their time engaged in pro bono activities. In addition to developing professional skills, pro bono work can help students identify an area of law in which they wish to practise and expose students to the non-financial rewards of the profession. It is in this way that many students and practitioners have found their passion for the law.

We are now exploring how to create such opportunities for all our students, while maintaining the tradition of student ownership that has long characterised pro bono work at NUS Law.

So a legal education must aspire to do far more than teach a student “the law”. Though there is, of necessity, a certain body of doctrinal knowledge that must be imparted, we would not be doing our job if we did not equip our graduates with skills that will last them a lifetime.

At the same time, we should also help our students to develop perspectives that enable them to see the logic behind the law, the factors that shape it, and the way it might be perceived from other cultures and traditions.

It will not always be possible to ensure that our students are able to provide ready answers to the problems that the globalised practice of law throws at them.

But my modest hope is that, if the education we offer them is effective, they will at least be asking the right questions.

The effect is the aim of the Faculty of Law at NUS.

By invitation features leading writers and thinkers from Singapore and the region.