Are law students cut from same cloth?

Many are from same top schools but their aspirations may be different, say legal minds

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That, every year, many of the new lawyers in Singapore come from only a few top junior colleges is an open-and-shut case. But it does not necessarily mean they are cut from the same cloth when it comes to, say, agreeing to do pro bono work or their choice of career, said lawyers and academics. All in, they presented a mixed bag of views.

If indeed there was a “pattern”, said top criminal lawyer Subhas Anandan, it could be in the lawyers’ socio-economic backgrounds rather than school backgrounds.

He opined that lawyers from lower-income families are more likely to pick the less lucrative area of criminal law.

“Lawyers from poorer backgrounds are more sympathetic to the man in the street, and what drives people to do what they do,” he said. “But it doesn’t matter what kind of school you went to.”

Still, he agreed with the recent decision by the National University of Singapore (NUS) law dean to review the faculty’s admission policies.

Professor Simon Chesterman, who took over as dean last month from Professor Tan Cheng Han, had told The Straits Times then that students in the faculty inevitably interacted with classmates “from similar backgrounds and who come from the same schools”.

But to be good lawyers, he felt, it is essential that the students learn how to understand different people from a wide range of backgrounds.

He added that the review would look at admitting up to 10 per cent of each cohort under a discretionary scheme in which factors besides academic grades – such as leadership and accomplishments in other areas – are considered.

Among the legal minds contacted by The Sunday Times, Attorney-General Sundaresh Menon backed the law dean’s suggestion.

He said “having only those with the best academic grades admitted to (NUS) Law School can give rise to problems if they all come out... seeking jobs and opportunities in the same sort of areas – typically high-end commercial practice or in the Legal Service”.

Potential problems

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Prof Tan, the former law dean, said the review is “in the spirit of the NUS Law School, which is always trying to improve”.

He said all good universities will want to admit good students through a fair and transparent process while allowing for as much diversity as possible.

Hence, it is “useful from time to time to look at what we are doing and to see if improvements can be made”, he said, adding that he did not think the faculty’s students had similar backgrounds or aspirations.

“I am confident in saying that our students come from different socio-economic backgrounds. Some require financial assistance and a priority of the (NUS) Law School in recent years has been to increase the number of bursaries on offer,” Prof Tan added.

On whether most new lawyers will go for top-paying jobs, he said while all “aspire to do well, many are very idealistic and do not see their futures only in terms of professional success. This is why our student pro bono club is one of our largest and most active student groups”.

Mr Wendell Wong, director of top law firm Drew & Napier, said he did not see any particular pattern in the areas of law that new NUS graduates applying to his firm wished to practise.

“It all boils down to individual personality and a host of factors such as interest, happiness, passion and quality of life,” he added.

Mr Anandan, saying he himself was from top school Raffles Institution, added: “It doesn’t mean that kids who come from neighbourhood schools will go into criminal law. They might be very ambitious.”

Third-year NUS law student Chen Zhida, 2A, a polytechnic graduate, said the kind of institutions that students come from would not affect their choice of law practice very much.

“There is another polytechnic graduate in my batch and I don’t think we are different from JC students in terms of the area of law we are interested in,” he said.

“I wouldn’t draw a direct correlation there – it really depends on the individual. Most of the people in the faculty come from top JCs, but even then, there are those who are particularly interested in human rights law or criminal work.”