NUS law school reviews student admission procedures

It says greater diversity among intake will widen experience of students

BY AMELIA TAN

THE majority of law students at the National University of Singapore (NUS) come from a handful of well-known schools, but this may soon change.

The law faculty is currently reviewing its admission procedures to ensure greater diversity in the backgrounds, abilities and interests of undergraduates.

“It is true that a large number of our students come from a small number of institutions,” the dean of the law school, Professor Simon Chesterman, told The Straits Times.

“Inevitably, our students will be interacting with classmates from similar backgrounds and who come from the same schools,” he said.

“But to be good lawyers, it is essential that the students learn how to understand different people from a wide range of backgrounds. We want to broaden the experience of our students.”

As part of the review, faculty staff will look at ways to attract students from a wider range of schools, not only those from schools like Raffles Institution and Hwa Chong Institution.

To encourage a broader range of junior college and integrated programme students to apply to do law, professors will visit more schools to talk about the NUS undergraduate programme and what a law career entails.

Students will be invited to attend open houses at the law school.

The review will also look at the kind of attributes the law school wants in applicants admitted under its discretionary scheme.

Up to 10 per cent of each cohort at NUS can be admitted under this scheme, where factors besides academic grades such as leadership and accomplishments in other areas are considered.

Admission to the law school is very competitive. Each year, between 750 and 800 hopefuls are shortlisted for interviews and a written test, but only 250 are admitted.

Prof Chesterman, who took over as dean from Prof Tan Cheng Han earlier this month, said: “We want to ensure that getting one B for your A levels does not mean you are excluded from being considered for a place at the law faculty.

“We will look out for things like leadership in co-curricular activities and involvement in community work.”

The review is being led by the vice-dean of student affairs, Associate Professor Joel Lee. The changes to the admission process and criteria will be applied to admissions in March next year.

Prof Chesterman also said he welcomed Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong’s recent call for more lawyers to volunteer to represent clients through pro bono work.

“The law faculty is working with the Singapore Institute of Legal Education and the Singapore Academy of Law to offer a pro bono programme by next year, and all students would have to go through it before graduating.

“Law students now help out at free legal clinics on an ad hoc basis, by supporting lawyers who are doing pro bono work.”

Prof Chesterman hopes the new programme will encourage more students to do pro bono work. He said this would give students more exposure to the different types of work that lawyers do and also help them find their calling in law.

He said: “Some are drawn to law because the pay is good. But many then burn out because money is not enough to keep them going. The ones who really stick with law are the ones who love it, because of the ideas or because of the difference they can make in society.”

NUS law undergraduates and practising lawyers welcomed the move to encourage students from a wider range of backgrounds to join the faculty.

First-year law student Joser Goh, 21, who attended Meridian Junior College, said: “I felt intimidated when I was applying because I did not know if other seniors who got in before me and I could not ask their advice.

“I think students from different JC’s will be encouraged to apply if they know more about the NUS law faculty.”

Criminal lawyer Suttha Ashamad said: “I think it is a good move that the law faculty is looking for other talents in students. Being able to interact and empathise with others are important qualities that lawyers should have.”

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