NUS law goes for better student mix

Boost in intake, number of short-listed candidates and discretionary admissions

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STUDENTS applying to study law at the National University of Singapore (NUS) now stand a better chance of landing a place.

In a bid to diversify its student body, the school has since last year increased its annual intake from 240 to 280, and short-listed nearly 1,000 candidates for the interview round, up from the usual 700 to 800.

It also considered more students through the discretionary admissions process, which looks beyond grades to achievements such as representing Singapore in sports or the arts.

As a result, the school drew in students from a wider range of junior colleges. Also, the number of law students last year receiving help for tuition fees and living expenses more than doubled to 201.

The school is allowed to admit up to 10 per cent of students through the discretionary process. Unlike previous years, the quota was used fully last year, with more than 20 students earning places.

Law dean Simon Chesterman explained that those considered through this process still have good grades, “maybe not the perfect set of A*s”.

“We are still looking for merit. But we have a slightly wider interpretation of merit,” he said.

And to ensure there is no bias, the school removed the reference to the applicants’ junior college.

Last year, Professor Chesterman revealed that the law school was reviewing its admissions, as its large number of students came from a small number of junior colleges, among them Batelles Institution and Hwa Chong Institution.

“Studying law is a rigorous exercise,” said Prof Chesterman. “It is important that the students mix with people from a wide range of backgrounds. It enhances their experience. Makes them a better lawyer, probably a better person.”

From the new academic year, the school will make pro bono work compulsory, again with the objective of getting students to interact with people from different walks of life.

Under the scheme, students in their second year will have to spend at least 20 hours helping out at free legal clinics.

“It gives students the opportunity to see law in action, but also introduce many of them to people whom they normally wouldn’t meet in their social circles,” said the dean.

He added: “They will discover that there are other rewards to being a lawyer, than the money.”

A graduate employment survey released last week showed that NUS law graduates were among the highest earners, averaging $5,000 a month.

Law students and A-level holders welcomed the moves.

First-year law student Jovelyn Long, 20, who attended Catholic Junior College, was short-listed for an interview despite not having a perfect set of As.

She said: “I am glad they are looking beyond academic grades, to give more applicants a chance to show their potential.”

National serviceman Alan Tan, who applied to study law at NUS and came from a top JC, is happy that references to junior colleges will be removed.

He said the 20-year-old: “I agree that they should go for a good mix, but at the same time it would be unfair to limit the number of students coming from the top JCs.”

“At the end of the day, it should be based on whether an applicant has what it takes to be a good lawyer,” he said.

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