NUS revamps law course to broaden knowledge, skills

School goes ‘gradeless’ for freshmen and beefs up practical experience

By AMELIA TENG

LAW students from the National University of Singapore (NUS) will soon graduate with a wider spread of knowledge and skills following changes to broaden legal education.

These include providing more practical experience, and making civil law modules compulsory so that students better understand legal systems in the region.

Law freshmen also need not fret about getting good grades initially, as it becomes the third school within NUS to use a “gradeless” scheme.

The other two are the medical school and Yale-NUS College.

These changes – following the faculty’s first curriculum review in more than a decade – will take effect for the new cohort joining in the new academic year in August.

At a press briefing yesterday, NUS law dean Simon Chesterman said that a key motivation behind the review was the country’s evolving legal practices due to broader trends like globalisation.

To this end, NUS law students will take two compulsory modules in civil law in the first two years.

The first looks at Singapore’s legal system in relation to its regional counterparts. The other focuses on legal systems in Asia.

Currently, students do not need to take civil law modules.

While Singapore uses common law, lawyers here often handle cross-border work together with their counterparts from different jurisdictions, said Professor Chesterman.

As part of the changes, students will have more opportunities to hone their skills outside the classroom, through legal clinics and modules on practical training, on top of the mandatory 20 hours of pro bono work in their second year.

They can also undertake projects on their own to see how lawyers can have an impact on society, Prof Chesterman said. “You’ll see that the rewards of being a lawyer go far beyond the money you make,” he said.

In tandem with the university’s broader move to remove grading for freshmen over the next few years, the new intake of law students in August will not be graded for the compulsory modules in the first semester, though they will still have to sit tests.

In the second semester, they will be given letter grades for the modules.

Currently, NUS law students have exams and are graded throughout their four years of education.

Ms Aleena Kua, 18, who took her A levels at Victoria Junior College last year and hopes to study law in Singapore, said she would like to know more about how the law works in other countries.

“No grades in the first semester (at NUS Law) is definitely a good move,” she said.

Ms Stefanie Yuen Thio, joint managing director at TSMP Law Corporation, said equipping law students with knowledge of civil law is essential as Singapore strives to be a global legal hub for companies and lawyers.

She said: “Currently, students are still quite bookish. They can do research for hours but are thrown off when faced with a practical question.”

“Being a lawyer is about finding real solutions, rather than right answers, making things work rather than scoring points,” Ms Thio added.

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Law school to do more research

The law school at the National University of Singapore, which already has three research centres, will be taking on more research initiatives with the launch of two new centres this year.

Centre for Maritime Law

This centre, which will look at issues like commercial maritime law and logistics, is being developed in consultation with the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore.

It will build on the faculty’s expertise in the maritime field, and its Master of Laws degree programme on maritime law.

It will be headed by the faculty’s vice-dean of research, Professor Stephen Girvin.

Centre for Banking & Finance Law

First of its kind in South-east Asia, this centre aims to engage local and international banks, lawyers, regulators and academics through research and events.

It will be headed by faculty members Associate Professors Dora Neo and Alexander Loke.