

Singapore

S'pore to set up new centre for international law

Keith Lin

624 words

28 February 2008

[Straits Times](#)

English

(c) 2008 Singapore Press Holdings Limited

Centre at NUS is part of govt plan to liberalise legal services sector

SINGAPORE is cementing its position as a leading regional hub for legal services, with plans to set up a new centre for international law.

The centre, which will be housed at the National University of Singapore, is being developed jointly by its law faculty, the Attorney-General's Chambers and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It will see legal academics, diplomats and lawyers from the private sector gather to conduct teaching and research on topics such as laws governing the aviation industry, international trade and the workings of Asean.

Announcing this new initiative in Parliament yesterday, Deputy Prime Minister and Law Minister S. Jayakumar said the centre is part of a comprehensive plan to gradually liberalise the legal services sector in the coming years.

The move to liberalise the legal services sector was recommended by a committee chaired by Judge of Appeal V. K. Rajah and tasked to conduct a comprehensive review of the sector.

Speaking during the debate on the Law Ministry's budget, Professor Jayakumar gave three reasons why it is in Singapore's national interest to open the sector's doors.

One, it will help meet the needs and demands of an economy which has become more diversified as international companies flock here.

Two, changes in the global legal landscape have also led to an 'exponential' increase in opportunities for international cross-border legal work, which Singapore will do well to tap on, he said.

Three, the move will also make Singapore an attractive destination for foreign as well as local legal talent, many of whom have flocked to international firms abroad.

Prof Jayakumar also addressed concerns raised by Mr Alvin Yeo (Hong Kah GRC) on two schemes introduced to strengthen the sector.

On the Enhanced Joint Law Venture scheme, he said the ministry is 'prepared to consider' letting potential joint-venture parties shape the terms according to how best both sides can prosper in the long term.

The scheme allows foreign law firms in these ventures to employ Singapore lawyers directly and to share in the profits of the local firm that is their partner.

As for the Qualified Foreign Law Firms scheme - which allows foreign firms to practise Singapore law of a high-end commercial nature on their own - he said that five such licences will be awarded by year-end.

Successful applicants will have to prove they can generate value for the economy and the legal services sector.

Prof Jayakumar also addressed calls by Dr Teo Ho Pin (Bukit Panjang) and Mr Hri Kumar (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC) for more measures to boost the supply of lawyers.

He noted that recent measures, such as setting up a second local law school at the Singapore Management University and raising the intake of students at the NUS law faculty, will result in a 70 per cent increase in law graduates in two to three years.

But boosting the supply of lawyers 'cannot be at the expense of quality', he said.

Dr Teo, in a reference to the recent spate of high-profile cases of lawyer misconduct, also asked for mechanisms to prevent such occurrences in future.

Replying, Prof Jayakumar said a working committee has been set up to look into suggestions such as barring lawyers from holding clients' monies.

But he cautioned that such a move would radically alter the conveyancing system, which may have a serious effect on how the property market operates.

The committee is due to make its recommendations in three to five months' time.

klin@sph.com.sg