Singapore’s third law school to accept students from Jan 2017

New school will be set up in UniSIM; 80% of intake will be for mature students or mid-career professionals

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SINGAPORE’S third law school specialising in criminal and family law will accept its first batch of 50 to 60 students for its part-time course from January 2017.

The Ministry of Law (MinLaw) on Tuesday said admissions will open in March this year and the course will be offered by SIM University (UniSIM).

The new law school will be set up in UniSIM and 80 per cent of the intake will be set aside for mature students or mid-career professionals who may include paralegals, law enforcement officers and social workers. The remaining is meant for fresh law leavers.

To cater to mature and working students, the course curriculum will be credit based and modular. It will also be practice oriented and multi-disciplinary, with a strong focus on applied research. Students will have to complete a six-month practicum for hands-on teaching and learning.

Said Prof Cheong Hee Kiat, president of UniSIM: “There will be less emphasis on some academic areas such as jurisprudence. To better prime and prepare our graduates for practice in the community, students will be offered relevant non-law subjects as part of their core curriculum. These subjects will include compulsory courses in social services and forensic science.”

Admission will be based on various criteria, including academic ability, aptitude, attitude, as well as interest in the practice of family and criminal law.

The school will offer a Bachelor of Laws for undergraduates and this can be completed in four to six years, as well as a Juris Doctor for those who already hold a first degree, to be done in three to six years.

To facilitate practical aspects of learning, the school will eventually be co-located with the State Courts and/or the Family Justice Courts.

Senior counsel Leslie Chew, who has been in the Singapore Legal Service for almost 10 years serving as Deputy Public Prosecutor, and as Senior District Judge in the State Courts, has been appointed dean of the law school.

The development of the school is guided by the recommendations of a steering committee led by Senior Minister of State of Finance and Law Indranee Rajah, who chaired the briefing on Tuesday.

Set up in November 2013, the committee submitted its proposals to MinLaw earlier this month and they have been accepted in full.

The idea for a third law school was mooted in May 2013, following anticipation of a practitioner crunch in the areas of criminal and family law, due to growing attrition over the years.

There are some 1,000 lawyers in these fields, of which close to 170 are over the age of 65, said Ms Indranee, adding that an average of 30 lawyers will reach the age of 65 every year in the next 10 years.

In addition, fresh law graduates generally choose to enter corporate and commercial law, and snub family and criminal law.

The young lawyers also leave their practice after the first few years of service, pointed out Ms Indranee, who noted that they leave either because of the high stress and emotional demands, or to pursue other interests.

Data available in the last four years showed that out of 10 lawyers who gained admission to the Singapore Bar, less than five of them remain in active practice after 10 years, MinLaw said.

“What this is trying to do is to identify upfront individuals who are passionate about this area (criminal and family law), so there’s no question about (whether) this is what you’re going to do. And if you’re passionate enough about it and have the determination to do it, here is the path, and hopefully that way, we be able to ensure people stay in this area,” said Ms Indranee.

Citing the example of handling contentious divorce cases involving children, senior counsel N Sreenivasan, who was present at the briefing, said criminal and family law are areas where “being older actually helps”.

When asked about the kind of lawyers he hopes to produce, Mr Chew said he hopes they are “lawyers with a heart, with an understanding of their role in society”.

The school will hold an open house on Feb 27.