Third law school a ‘healthy’ addition

Lawyers hail opening of UniSIM school next January with focus on family and criminal law

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Singapore’s legal fraternity has welcomed the “healthy” addition of a third law school here, which will specialise in family and criminal law.

UniSIM Law School at SIM University will open in January next year, the Ministry of Law announced yesterday. It will have an intake of 60 students and applications start next month. Around 80 per cent will be mature students with the rest made up of A-level graduates and polytechnic diploma holders.

Mature students are those with work experience, seeking a mid-career switch to law. They could include paralegals, law enforcement officers and social workers.

“A lot of younger lawyers have gravitated towards the corporate transactional and dispute work, and if the trend continues, we anticipate that there will be a shortage of family and criminal lawyers,” said Law Society president Thio Shen Yi. “Every year, we lose lawyers as people retire. For these two areas, we need more than replacement numbers.”

The Senior Counsel said marriage disputes, including cross-border ones, could become more common and complex with rising property values affecting asset disputes. As Singapore develops, it becomes increasingly regulated, giving rise to more criminal regulatory breaches.

According to lawyer Ivan Cheong, who specialises in matrimonial and family law: “It takes a certain mindset and aptitude for people to want to practise criminal and family law.”

Matrimonial law, for example, involves very personal and emotional issues. “Quite a lot of legal practitioners don’t like to practise in this area as it can be quite acrimonious.”

Family lawyers may have to act as “counsellors” when understanding their clients’ position. This is where the life experience of mature students, as well as their passion for their field, will come in handy. Clients meeting them will feel more assured, said Mr Cheong.

However criminal lawyer Amolat Singh believes it may be difficult to ensure that graduates from the new school will stay in family or criminal law in the long run as some commercial lawyers earn two times more.

“If the problem is people not wanting to do family or criminal work, increasing the number of places may not solve it,” he said. “Family and criminal law is where you find the least advantaged people in society. They don’t have money and cannot afford to pay you well.” He added that mid-career lawyers will probably need to support their family and might not stay on in the field even if they were idealistic at first.

But although some, like SC Thio, feel that the new school could add to an oversupply, others disagreed.

“Unfortunately they will also come out with more practical skills, which will complement the fact that they are mid-career professionals who have been exposed to the law,” he said.

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