

Fewer students list law as top choice at university

Warnings on supply glut may have influenced applicants; good job prospects spur demand for computer science

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School-leavers eyeing a place in the universities this year appeared to lose some interest in law, but were eager to study anything related to computers.

Figures provided by the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Singapore Management University (SMU) show a drop in the number of students listing law as their first-choice course.

Law is one of the most popular courses at NUS, just after medicine and dentistry. But this year, 17 per cent fewer applicants listed law as their first choice compared with last year.

SMU saw a similar drop, of 22 per cent this year, compared with last year. Still, both universities are maintaining their intake – NUS at 250 students and SMU at 180 – and applicants still need top grades to get into law.

NUS law dean Simon Chesterman said: “Even with the drop in applica-

tion numbers, four students put law as their first choice for each place we have available... It certainly hasn’t made it any easier for students to get a place at NUS Law.”

NUS vice-provost (undergraduate education and student life) Bernard Tan said warnings on the glut of law graduates, driven by overseas graduates, probably influenced students.

“When the Law Minister says there is an oversupply of law graduates, people take notice,” he said.

Three years back, Law Minister K. Shanmugam had warned that while the number of law graduates is expected to grow by nearly a third by this year, the training contracts and jobs at law firms might not grow at the same rate.

Law graduates have to undergo six months of training before being admitted to the Singapore Bar. Most of these contracts go to local law graduates, leaving their foreign-educated peers to compete for the rest.

But if the interest in law is waning, the interest in computing is heating up.

Professor Tan said NUS saw a 35

per cent increase in the number of students listing computer science courses as their first choice.

The NUS School of Computing is offering 520 places this year, an increase from 370 places last year.

Higher demand has pushed up cut-off scores for the course. Previously A-level students could enter it with three Bs. Now, they need at least two As.

SMU, which offers several specialist tracks in the field, including business analytics and cyber security, said the number of applicants who selected information systems as their first choice increased by 12 per cent, compared with the previous year. The university is offering 300 places this year in the course, up from 270 last year.

Prof Tan said the explosion in demand for computer science courses is down to good job prospects for graduates in the field.

Graduates from the information systems course at NUS saw the highest jump in salaries, according to the graduate employment survey released earlier this year.

They took home a median monthly salary of \$4,000, a 12.7 per cent rise from 2015. Graduates from NUS’ computer science course also saw a pay rise, by 8.1 per cent, from \$3,700 to \$4,000.

Prof Tan noted the pent-up demand for graduates in fields such as cyber security and data analytics.

“Big data is now part of every industry – from finance to telcos to health care,” he said. Young people are also interested in mobile technologies, he added.

As for law, Professor Chesterman said the drop in applicants listing it as their first choice may have an upside: “Anecdotally, one of the consequences of the market shift is that students think more carefully about whether they are applying to do law because they have a passion for it, or simply because they are getting good grades.

“This is a good thing, because those who get the most out of a law degree – and who contribute the most to the profession – are those driven not just by grades or salary, but by a love of learning and a commitment to justice.”

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LAW FACULTY INTAKES

250

At NUS

180

At SMU