

# Law schools heed CJ's call to reinvent amid change

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**They adopt holistic admission criteria and offer greater breadth of classes**

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**Lim Min Zhang**

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Unlike most other law students at her school, first-year National University of Singapore (NUS) undergraduate Vanessa Zavir did not score straight As, and failed to make it into law school six years ago.

Undeterred, the aspiring

maritime lawyer spent three years teaching public communications freelance and completed a diploma in law and management at Temasek Polytechnic, which helped her get admission into the NUS law school this year.

Ms Zavir, 25, said: "With my experience in teaching, I was able to market myself as someone with a different skillset, who is not afraid of taking an unconventional route."

She is an example of someone who fits well with Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon's call for law schools to reinvent their admission criteria amid challenges facing the industry, at a speech given at the 60th anniversary gala of the NUS law faculty on Oct 20.

Among other things, Chief Justice Menon said two challenges for future lawyers are in how the legal profession is no longer jurisdiction-bound, and how technology is disrupting lawyers' jobs.

In response to the call, law schools here say they are already in the process of preparing students for a future with greater use of technology and international and foreign law, through holistic admission processes and the breadth of classes they are required to take.

At the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS), 20 per cent of its current batch of 60 law students, with an average age of 32, are fresh school leavers with no work experience.

The school focuses on training family and criminal lawyers. Dean Leslie Chew said the course at SUSS takes a multidisciplinary approach.

"For instance, to equip them for family law practice, our students have to study social services in Singapore as a compulsory subject in Year One. Similarly, to prepare the students for criminal law practice, our Year One students are required to take a course in forensic sciences taught by the Health Sciences Authority."

NUS law dean Simon Chesterman said the Chief Justice's call for a

commitment to service was particularly timely, as the school launched a new centre that brings together pro bono and clinical legal education programmes on Tuesday.

"On the question of admissions, we do not apologise for having high academic standards. But we also evaluate students holistically, looking for students that have ability but also a passion for law and justice," he added.

For the academic year 2016/2017, 90 per cent of successful applicants to NUS law attained at least four As.

Singapore Management University (SMU) law dean Goh Yihan said the school wants to ensure that the students' legal education prepares them for a future with technological disruption. A vast majority of students in SMU's juris doctor programme have prior working experience, said the university.

Among other efforts, it has established an advisory council on law and technology, which will make recommendations on how technology should be infused in research and curriculum. It includes practitioners, academics and general counsel from leading global tech companies, banks and law firms.

Law firms said a good lawyer must have more than just legal knowledge. Said Rajah & Tann's recruitment partner Paul Tan: "Greater public access to legal information means that knowledge alone does not distinguish a good lawyer from another. The lawyer who is well-read and able to value-add in terms of advice to clients will stand out."

WongPartnership's managing partner Ng Wai King said that while academic credentials will always be a given, it is not the be all and end all.

Law Society president Gregory Vijayendran said: "Law does not exist in vacuo. The study of related disciplines such as commerce, history, sociology, psychology, counselling and neurology will give our law students depth in their insight."

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