



UNISIM LAW SCHOOL – HERALDING A NEW DAWN FOR FAMILY AND CRIMINAL LAW

A note from Indranee Rajah S.C., Senior Minister of State for Law

The UniSIM Law School (ULS) report is out! It's been covered by the media in broad brush strokes, but I thought I should give lawyers a deeper insight into the recommendations as this concerns our profession and marks another milestone in our legal journey.

A QUICK RECAP

In November 2013, I was appointed chairperson of the Steering Committee which was tasked to make recommendations on the direction, key features and curriculum design of ULS.

This was a first for me. I'd not hitherto had the chance to steer the direction of an entire faculty, but I have to say it was rewarding and fulfilling work. You can see from the composition of the committees that we drew on a broad spectrum of expertise from the bar, bench, academia, government and other professions. Here let me express my appreciation to the Curriculum Committee led by Presiding Judge of the Family Justice Courts, Justice Valerie Thean, for their painstaking and thorough work on the curriculum recommendations.

We also sought an international perspective and explored a different model to the traditional research universities. We visited law schools in the US and UK well regarded for their applied programmes, including Georgetown University Law Centre, George Washington Law School and Northumbria University, as well as the Oxford University's Centre for Criminology.

Our recommendations to the government have been accepted.



A VISION FOR A VERY DIFFERENT LAW SCHOOL

We have envisioned the ULS as a very different kind of law school.

It will be a specialist law school, focusing on family and criminal law. It will be our pipeline of family and criminal lawyers for both the private and public sector.

It will anchor the teaching, training, practice, professional development and applied research of criminal and family law, and raise these practice areas to new levels.

It will also provide an opportunity for individuals to embark on law as a second career, and an additional path for prospective law students who may otherwise have to go overseas.

The student profile will be different.

- Practitioner feedback is that given the nature of family and criminal practice, maturity and life experience is important for a lawyer to stay the course.
- As such, we have recommended that at least 80% of the ULS intake should comprise mature students with prior work experience.
- The remaining 20% or less will be students fresh out of JC or poly.
- Cohort size will start with 50 to 60 students, and progressively increase to 75 students.

The admission criteria and selection process will be different.

- Selection will not be based on historical academic records but present ability.
- Applicants must clear a baseline test of substantive ability - the Law National Aptitude Test (LNAT) or a local equivalent.
- In addition, they will be assessed on their overall aptitude and suitability for the practice of family and criminal law.

The curriculum will be practice-oriented.

- The pedagogy will not just focus on academic content but will also put a heavy emphasis on imparting skills for legal practice.
- A key feature is the 6-month Practicum, where students will work on real cases supervised by a qualified lawyer.

The curriculum will also be cross-disciplinary.

- As any practitioner knows, family and criminal practice is not just about law; it is as much about people, understanding their emotions and counselling them.
- The curriculum will include subjects from other disciplines which are relevant and useful for practice, e.g. social work and criminology.

There will be two types of degrees.

- LL.B. (for those with no prior degree).
- J.D. (for those who have a prior degree).



The degree programme will be structured for maximum flexibility.

- The programme is designed around the fact that the students and adjunct faculty will primarily be working adults.
- Classes will be in the evenings and on weekends (possibly save for the Practicum).
- It will be credit based and modular.
- Students can complete their degrees between 4 - 6 years for LL.B. and 3 – 6 years for J.D.
- It will be IT-enabled, with online access.

ULS will also be an institution for continuing professional development.

- It will provide professional development courses for family and criminal law practitioners.
- Practitioners can take standalone modules, e.g. criminal lawyers may find the forensics courses helpful.
- Non-lawyers can also take modules to augment their work e.g. a policeman might take CPC modules, while a family counsellor might take Women's Charter modules.

It will be a centre for applied research.

- There is need for more research on issues relevant to Singapore based on local data, e.g. juvenile crime, child abuse or domestic violence.
- Such research will be useful in shaping policy and legislative reform.
- It will also help the broader ecosystem of professionals, government and non-government organisations working in these fields to gain a deeper understanding of family law issues and criminal justice.

ULS will be situated in the heart of the action.

- We have recommended that the new law school be co-located with the State Courts and/or Family Justice Courts.
- Conventional wisdom is that a law school should be on a university campus. But this is not a conventional law school, and I felt that given its practice oriented mission, it should be where the action is - with the State and Family Justice Courts. This way, the students can feel the pulse and vibe of practice long before they graduate. They can sit in on court hearings when they have (or can make) time. It will also facilitate their access to pro bono work that does not require a practising certificate, and learn through volunteering.
- It will also make it much easier for lawyers and judges to teach as adjunct faculty and access the professional development courses.
- So when the new State Court building is ready, ULS will hopefully be there.
- (The only thing missing now is to have a really good coffee joint in the new building to provide caffeine transfusions, the lifeblood of lawyers. Forgot to put that in the report, but I hope the Presiding Judge of the State Courts is reading this...)

THE OFT-ASKED QUESTION - WHY, AND WHY NOW?

Now let me address the question that usually comes up when the third law school is mentioned - which is why we are proceeding when there is currently an increased number of law graduates trying to get training contracts?

The answer is that ULS is necessary and relevant notwithstanding the current number of graduates.

We currently have good practising family and criminal lawyers, but over the years fewer lawyers have been entering these practice areas. There's a growing gap in the middle. We may not feel it currently while we still have our leading lights in practice, but there is an impending shortage looming over the horizon. If we don't act now, society as a whole will be greatly disadvantaged when the senior lawyers retire. The societal impact of family and criminal law and the need for good practitioners in these areas are too important for us to let this go unaddressed.

More fresh grads does not automatically mean more criminal and family lawyers. Experience has shown that fresh grads from NUS, SMU and the overseas universities generally do not choose to enter family and criminal law, and among those who do, the attrition rate is high. The reason, as explained above, is that family and criminal practice is emotionally demanding and requires some life experience and maturity to handle it well. Some young lawyers grow into this naturally, but many more do not and exit.

Rather than pushing on a string therefore, the answer lies instead in identifying upfront individuals with the requisite emotional maturity and life experience who are predisposed towards the practice of family and criminal law and genuinely passionate about it. The ULS admission and selection criteria are geared towards achieving that.

I did read some comments in the media wondering if graduates would stay in family and criminal law given that the remuneration is often less than for commercial cases. To this I would say that even today criminal and family lawyers do other types of legal work e.g. general civil commercial work. The ULS LL.B./J.D. will enable its graduates to practice generally. So its graduates will not be in a different position from criminal and family lawyers today, and can earn from other areas of practice in addition to their family and criminal cases.

We have already taken steps to address the current numbers in the market, such as allowing Supervising Solicitors to take on more trainees. Given the marketability of a law degree, the current grads also have viable job options outside of practice. So the current situation, while uncomfortable for some in the short term, is one that will eventually resolve itself. However, we need to make provision for the future.

With ULS, we hope to have a steady pipeline of lawyers with a sound grasp of the law who have a strong sense of justice and a heart for their fellow man and who will be at the forefront of promoting access to justice in Singapore.

THE DEAN

The ULS Dean is no stranger to the profession - Prof Leslie Chew S.C. Leslie has been at the forefront of practice as a Senior Counsel and was also a State Court Judge and involved in the administration of justice in that capacity. He will bring invaluable experience of both bench and the bar to this practice-oriented law school.



A LAW SCHOOL FOR ALL

The ULS will be no ivory tower. It has been conceived very much as a place where the study of law interfaces daily life, revolving around the axis of community and society. It will be a place where students, academics, practitioners, judges and professionals interact to teach, discuss, inform and contribute to the development of family and criminal law and practice.

ULS is envisioned as a school in partnership with practitioners. As such, we welcome lawyers to be part of this endeavour, be it teaching as full time or adjunct faculty, offering internship positions at your firm or other ways. Help us to build a law school with a difference to make a difference!

*– Indranee Rajah S.C., Senior Minister of State for Law
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