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. 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.”

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 into play. Clients needing 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. “If the problem is people not wanting to do family or criminal work, increasing the number of places may not solve it,” he said.

But although some, like SC Thio, feel that the new school could add to an oversupply, others disagreed. Currently, there are lawyers who cannot get a training contract, while some finish their training but cannot get jobs, added Mr Singh.

Criminal lawyer Sunil Sudheesan said having a third law school is unlikely to add to an oversupply, as the Law Ministry could lower the intake of foreign-trained lawyers.

“These lawyers (from the third school) will also come out with a more practical skillset, which will complement the fact that they are mid-career professionals who have been exposed to the law,” he said.