New law dean at NUS

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SINGAPORE — A successor has been found for the longest-serving dean at the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) law school.

The NUS announced yesterday that, with effect from January, Professor Tan Cheng Han — who had helmed the faculty since 2001 — will be succeeded by Professor Simon Chesterman, 39, (picture).

Prof Chesterman joined the faculty as an associate professor in 2007.

Prof Tan Cheng Han, 46, was appointed for another three-year term in January last year, four months before his third term was due to expire. This despite him having earlier indicated that he would be stepping down and a search was on for a successor.

In an interview with The Straits Times published in September 2009, Prof Tan Cheng Han even cited the names of his possible successors: NUS law lecturer Michael Hor and Professor John Phillips from King’s College London.

At the press conference where the announcement was made, Prof Chesterman, an Australian, revealed he had been approached in 2008 for the dean’s post and that he had turned it down as he had just joined the faculty and had not attained full professorship.

Also, the New York University School of Law Singapore programme, which he was instrumental in establishing, was up for renewal, he added.

Responding to Today’s queries, Prof Tan Eng Chye, NUS Deputy President (Academic Affairs) and Provost, said that “an international Dean search usually takes about 12 to 18 months to complete”.

He added that the school’s Dean Search Committee had invited applications in November last year and looked for possible candidates through 18 top international law schools and identified about 60 possible candidates.

Internally, “one very strong candidate was nominated from three potential nominees”, he said.

Prof Tan Eng Chye added: “In the end, it was a choice between two very strong candidates. The committee unanimously recommended Prof Simon Chesterman for the deanship, which was approved by the NUS Board of Trustees.”

Citing Prof Chesterman’s “international credentials and his keenness in research, especially in the area of intelligence and international law”, Prof Tan Eng Chye noted that the new dean “has the necessary experience and drive to make one of the top law schools in Asia even better”.

Prof Chesterman said he will be implementing changes in the school’s curriculum, expanding its research abilities as well as boosting its international links. He said: “We have a reputation of producing outstanding lawyers but … I think we need to improve on that … to ensure that they aren’t just good technical lawyers but that they are creative thinkers.”

Prof Chesterman said the faculty will be launching a new Centre for Asian Legal Studies early next year as well as a Centre for Law and Business.

Such “centres of excellence” will enable the school to retain and attract talent and would also further anchor Singapore as an international legal hub, he said.