

# 'Legal barbarians' force Wits to rethink its LLB degree

The four-year under-graduate law degree aimed at transforming the legal profession is to be scrapped at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits).



Wits Professor Vinodh Jaichand [Mam Law School](#)

The university announced that its LLB would in future offered only as a post-graduate degree, with students needing to attain a BA Law or BCom law degree first. This will, in effect, add a year to the studies of law students.

The announcement has been a long time coming, with much criticism having been levelled at the quality of some law graduates, and even of their lack of basic numeracy and literacy. Some critics of the course have gone as far as labelling graduates "legal barbarians".

Wits said: "In meetings with law firms and members of the bar, one assessment was uniformly received - the four-year under-graduate LLB does not adequately prepare students for the legal profession."

The announcement was praised by academics at four law schools elsewhere in the country.

## Move criticised

But the president of the Black Lawyers' Association, Busani Mabunda, criticised the move, saying it might have a negative impact on the transformation of the legal sector as a whole in the long-term.

He said it may also prevent under-privileged black students from pursuing a career in law.

Transformation has long been a hot topic in the legal profession, with the judiciary picked from its ranks. This comes after

Wits Vice-cancellor Adam Habib's recent announcement that admission policies of the medical school would become more skewed in favour of academic merit.

Probed on whether Wits was slowly revolutionising tertiary education, the head of its school of law, Professor Vinodh Jaichand, said: "Wits is not a quiet place in terms of thinking. These are not coincidences. We are constantly interrogating what we do and how well we do it."

But Mabunda said Wits was "pre-empting" processes to reform legal education.

The four-year under-graduate LLB was introduced in 1997 to increase the number of women and black students by lopping off a year's financial cost of studying towards becoming a lawyer.

## **Legal technicians**

"We want to produce lawyers who understand their social function and duty, which has been missing, because we have just been training legal technicians through the current LLB," said Jaichand.

Many law firms point to the lack of maturity or awareness of the graduates to be given stewardship of clients' affairs. Some firms of attorneys, who regularly recruit our graduates, employ them on the proviso that they complete additional academic qualifications.

The university estimates that only 50% of law graduates actually enter the profession. But, according to the Law Society of SA, graduate numbers have increased rapidly. In 2004 there were 1,972 LLB graduates, which almost doubled in 2012 when 3,810 graduated.

The chief executive of the Law Society, Nic Swart, said it was estimated that only 20% of those who entered the under-graduate LLB programme completed it in four years. He said most students took five or six years, which negated the initial intention of the 1997 change.

The post-graduate LLB at Wits will include additional courses in ethics, which was identified as a problem by the law society, legal research and writing.

Source: The Times via I-Net Bridge

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