



## Back to school at 46, now he's got a law degree

PHOTO BY SYAFIQAH HAMID

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**SINGAPORE** — It seemed to be the worst possible time to consider a career switch. The global financial crisis had just begun but Mr Asoka Markandu, then 46, saw an opportunity in the crisis.

A general manager at foreign exchange trading solutions firm FX Alliance LLC — where he managed the Asia business across three offices — Mr Markandu decided to quit his job and head back to school.

Mr Markandu was awarded a Juris Doctor (JD) degree yesterday after completing a two-year course in the Singapore Management University's (SMU) programme. The postgraduate law degree, which was first offered in 2009, allows graduates to be admitted to the Singapore Bar to become qualified lawyers after completing Bar examinations and a six-month practice with a law firm.

SMU's School of Law is the first here to introduce the Juris Doctor programme, an American-style system of graduate legal education for those interested in a second career in law.

At 48, Mr Markandu was the oldest among the first cohort of 18 Juris Doctor graduates. Looking back at his decision, Mr Markandu said: "I was good at what I was doing and anything beyond that requires a regional role and intensive travelling which I was already doing. With growing teen-aged children and an elderly father who needed more care, I wanted to make a change."

After he quit his job in January 2009, he looked at his options, which included "doing something completely different". He came across SMU's JD programme and applied for enrolment after consulting his family.

Finding out that he was the oldest in class did not deter Mr Markandu. In fact, he gleaned

interesting lessons from the younger generation, especially the ability to multi-task. "The younger students could be checking out their Facebook, chatting online, listening to the lecture, taking down notes, finding out the answers to questions in class by googling them, while I was spending time listening and leafing through the notes."

As to whether he felt any less being the oldest, Mr Markandu said, on the contrary, he felt fortunate to have enrolled in the course at his age.

"Singapore has an ageing population and a high retirement age. There are many people like me who need a second career. The biggest consideration for anyone thinking of a mid-career switch is opportunity cost. It's a huge investment.

"I was fortunate as I was financially comfortable and compared to someone younger who may have to worry about getting married, buying a house and car. I hope that

the Government could look into a financial scheme to help mature students. Perhaps the answer to the Chief Justice's call to boost the criminal bar is to focus on mature students," said Mr Markandu.

Over the last two years, he spent about S\$60,000 on school fees and about S\$2,000 on textbooks, on top of keeping his financial commitments to his family and maintaining his own expenses.

Mr Markandu — who has worked with Reuters Asia Pte Ltd, Citibank and Andersen Consulting — feels his life experience will help him make the switch successfully.

He said: "Several potential employers have asked me how I would feel working for a younger person. I believe that the practice of law is developed around a mentorship model and the challenge is to find the right mentor no matter what their age. I believe I am able to bring to bear my experience and network of contacts."