

S'pore facing a glut of lawyers

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Singapore (The Straits Times/ANN) - Over just four years up to March last year, the number of practising lawyers here leapt by nearly 25 per cent to more than 4,400.

Another 1,500 are expected to join them in the next three years. And there has been a sharp rise in those heading overseas to study law. In Britain alone, the number of Singapore law students more than doubled from 510 to 1,142 between 2010 and last year.

Law Minister K. Shanmugam dished out these numbers yesterday as he warned that Singapore could soon have more lawyers than jobs for them all.

He urged law students to temper career and salary expectations, and maybe even consider other jobs.

Speaking at the Criminal Justice Conference organised by the Singapore Management University (SMU) and National University of Singapore, which both have law schools, he said the number of lawyers is expected to grow by nearly a third in the next three years.

But "the market is not going to grow by 30 per cent", he said, pointing out that this year, nearly 650 graduates will compete for about 490 practice training contracts at law firms, to get the training they need before being admitted to the Singapore Bar.

"About 150 students will have difficulty getting a training contract, let alone employment after that," said Mr Shanmugam, who is a senior counsel himself. "The study of law provides an excellent training of the mind, so I don't want to be seen as discouraging people... but you have to have a realistic understanding of the market, the economy, the total structure."

While Singapore is trying to "grow the legal market" through initiatives such as the Singapore International Commercial Court to handle dispute resolution, students could go into fields like banking, business, public service and even politics with their law degrees, he suggested.

Rules governing training contracts could be changed to make it easier for more students to get them, "but there is a limit to how much the Government can intervene in the market", he said.

He added that those who do get jobs should be realistic about their salaries: "You see headlines that top lawyers make 'x' million dollars, but there is a huge difference between what the top two or three lawyers make, and what everyone else makes."

Lawyers and academics whom The Sunday Times spoke to admitted that future lawyers should be prepared to face a lot of competition from their peers in the marketplace.

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SMU law lecturer Eugene Tan said "the days of law firms chasing law graduates are now over".

"Grades are helpful but students should also hone skills like writing and crafting legal arguments and research to improve their chances of being hired," he added.

Veteran lawyer Chia Boon Teck said law graduates could consider joining multinational companies with large legal departments. "If you want to join a law firm, study very very hard and aim to be among the top few graduates. Also, make as many friends who are lawyers as possible," he advised.

Ms Lynn Kan, who is starting her second year at SMU's post-graduate law programme, said some of her classmates are already considering taking on more internships to improve their prospects. The 27-year-old said: "I've got my training contract already but I was really lucky."