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**Headline: Raising the bar: Preparing lawyers to stay the course**

## **Raising the bar: Preparing lawyers to stay the course**

Many lawyers quit the profession. Law schools can cultivate staying power in their students through more exposure to the real world and by instilling a sense of purpose in them.



A strong legal system depends on a critical mass of highly competent and ethically grounded lawyers. At the 19th Conference of Chief Justices of Asia and the Pacific in 2024, Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon emphasised the importance of a “healthy” Bar to the effective administration of justice.

Yet the legal profession has long faced high attrition rates, and continues to do so. As legal educators who have observed the profession’s evolution for over three decades, we find this trend deeply concerning. Can our legal system continue to thrive with a shrinking pool of legal talent, especially as the issues we face grow ever more complex?

Reflecting on the problem, we constantly find ourselves drawn to one underlying question: Are we doing enough to prepare our law graduates for the realities of a demanding and often unforgiving profession?

A report by the Working Group for the Reform of Legal Education, released in January 2024, offered a bold blueprint for modernising the training of lawyers in Singapore. It emphasised three key themes for law school education: equipping lawyers with the skills and knowledge for a global, complex, and digital economy; fostering stronger industry-academic partnerships to nurture practice-ready graduates; and promoting high standards and ethical values to safeguard the honour and integrity of the profession.

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However, we believe there is an implicit fourth theme that deserves greater attention – resilience. The need to cultivate staying power within the legal profession has never been more urgent. Legal education must not only produce capable lawyers, but also nurture individuals who are equipped to sustain meaningful careers.

#### Bridging theory and practice

In our years of teaching, we have seen how students grapple with the chasm between theory and practice. At the start of their legal education, students sometimes perceive the law as an intellectual pursuit but, in reality, it is a craft, and has always been so. Mastery comes not from simply memorising rules or coming up with formulas, but from sizing up issues quickly and applying legal principles to address real-world problems practically. For this reason, we have long advocated for a closer industry-academic partnership, because we believe that there is no substitute for real-world engagement.

Multi-disciplinarity is a key element of that engagement because legal issues rarely exist in silos – they intersect with social, political, and economic dimensions. To navigate this complexity, students at the Yong Pung How School of Law at SMU receive foundational training in adjacent areas such as financial and digital literacy. Some courses are explicitly experiential, built around solving real-world problems. Some of our students also take up second majors in fields like business or the social sciences, leveraging the university's academic flexibility to broaden their perspectives.

This grounding is reinforced through training in moot courts, legal writing modules, and capstone projects – all designed to simulate the pressures and demands of practice. But classroom tools are only part of the equation. What truly prepares students for the profession is mentorship from seasoned practitioners. These mentors pass on the often-unwritten rules of the legal craft: managing client expectations, navigating difficult negotiations, and maintaining professionalism under pressure. These lessons cannot be learnt from textbooks or lectures.

We have had conversations with students who have interned or worked with firms involved in complex cross-border work. Despite their academic excellence, sometimes these students feel that Singapore's legal education system could have prepared them better to deal with such work – whether in terms of learning about the laws of a different jurisdiction, or even just communicating effectively with their foreign counterparts. These conversations reinforced our belief that global exposure is no longer a luxury, but a necessity – perhaps global immersion might even be needed.

Indeed, while Singapore law students have access to exchange programmes, summer/winter schools, and international competitions, many still lack hands-on experience and access to networks in foreign markets.

To address this, for the last couple of years, our law school has ramped up overseas internship opportunities for our students, particularly in key regions such as Asean, China and India. These internships go beyond exposure to foreign laws – they provide opportunities for engaging with legal professionals from diverse cultural and legal traditions. In doing so, they encourage adaptability, resilience and cross-cultural fluency – traits that are invaluable in today's interconnected world.

The response from our students has been overwhelmingly positive, with all available placements quickly taken up in each cycle. However, the initiative is not without its challenges.

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One significant barrier is language – opportunities in jurisdictions where English is not the business language can be limited.

What law schools can do

Talent retention in law is also a deeply personal concern for us. Over the years, the legal sector has seen promising young lawyers leave the profession or even the wider industry, disillusioned and burned out. And although formal education cannot single-handedly resolve this issue, we believe that law schools play a pivotal role in shaping how students perceive the profession.

For instance, we need to do more than teach rules and regulations; we need to instil a sense of purpose, and help students appreciate that legally trained persons are uniquely placed to help people with legal challenges. Why do we practice law? What does it mean to serve justice? Reflecting on these questions early in one's career can provide the emotional resilience needed to weather the inevitable challenges of legal practice.

To this end, the notion of mentoring must also evolve – as noted too in the Final Report of the Ethics and Professional Standards Committee in 2025.

Specifically, mentoring can no longer be viewed simply as the passing down of knowledge, experience and wisdom from one generation to the next. True mentoring in today's legal landscape must be a two-way exchange – a dialogue between generations that allows for mutual learning and collaboration.

We echo CJ Menon's remarks in his 2024 address that the new generation must be supported in absorbing the core values that have long underpinned the legal profession: integrity, fairness and a deep commitment to justice; however, at the same time, the older generation must be open to learning about the aspirations, working styles and values of younger lawyers. This mutual understanding is key to co-creating a culture that is not only sustainable, but also inspiring and future-ready.

Ultimately, the future of legal education is not just about producing technically competent graduates. It is about nurturing thoughtful, well-rounded professionals who understand the unique role that lawyers play in shaping society, and who are prepared to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and fast-changing world.

Strong industry ties, meaningful global exposure, and a focus on professional values are not mere aspirations – they are imperatives. As educators, practitioners and mentors, we each have a part to play in building a profession that not only endures but also inspires – one that future generations will aspire to join and sustain.

As educators committed to seeing the profession flourish, we urge our fellow educators, practitioners and policymakers to view this reform as more than an institutional upgrade. It is an opportunity to shape the next generation of lawyers who will not only excel in their craft but also find lasting fulfilment in their careers.

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