

Singapore needs more people trained in international law

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From maritime boundaries to digital trade, the global legal order defines Singapore’s place in the world. Building expertise in international law is a national imperative.

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“Where has this court discussed the doctrine you refer to?” This was one of many questions Ms Ralee Toh, representing Singapore Management University at the 2024 Lachs Space Law Moot world championship round, had to answer.

The person who asked her the question? Mr Peter Tomka, former president of the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Without missing a beat, Ms Toh answered with both the correct case name and the exact paragraph. Ms Toh and her teammates, Elizabeth Ho and Genieve Wu, not only went on to win the final, but six months later, would again emerge triumphant at the Jessup Moot, an even larger international law contest.

This time, it was Ms Wu’s turn to be interrogated by ICJ judges in the world championship final. With hundreds in the audience watching, she confidently fielded questions on exclusive economic zones and sovereign immunity.

As a law academic, I have long advocated making moot court a mandatory law school activity. Mooting, which simulates courtroom argument, trains students to analyse complex disputes, research for months, think on their feet, and make persuasive arguments based on fact and law.

These are skills that remain resilient in an increasingly AI-driven world. In international law moots especially, students internalise the norms, reasoning, and spirit of diplomacy in ways no textbook can teach.

Despite Singapore’s longstanding success in international law moot competitions, not many of our graduates embark on international law careers, be it in practice, policymaking, or academia.

There is still a gap between our capabilities and our national investment in this domain. This is not a status quo we want to preserve.

INTERNATIONAL LAW IS OF EXISTENTIAL IMPORTANCE TO SINGAPORE

For a small and vulnerable city-state, international law is not an abstract concept, but a necessary scaffolding for our survival.



The team from SMU that won the 2025 Jessup Moot in Washington DC: (standing, from left) Mr Alexander Kamsany Lee, Ms Fu Qiyuan, Ms Lovein Sui, Associate Professor Chen Siyuan; (seated, from left) Ms Ralee Toh, Ms Erica Wee, Ms Elizabeth Ho, Ms Genieve Wu. PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHEN SIYUAN

Of course, when we look at various conflicts around the world today, it can be tempting to conclude that international law is toothless or merely aspirational. That perception risks making us cynical and resigned, even though our very prosperity depends on it.

At the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan reminded delegates that while “the UN and other international organisations have not evolved to keep up with the times”, international law “still remains the best way to uphold global peace and prosperity”. He is right. Without a shared legal order, the world would descend into greater chaos, and small states like Singapore would have no recourse when larger powers flex their might.

International law quietly underpins much of Singapore’s economic prosperity: our role as an aviation, maritime, finance, and legal hub depends on stable international frameworks that guarantee a great degree of order and predictability.

These include the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos), and the Chicago Convention, which established the International Civil Aviation Organisation. When international disputes arose, we have been able to resolve them peacefully at courts such as the Permanent Court of Arbitration, as well as the ICJ.

If we agree that international law is of existential importance to Singapore, then we must also cultivate far more Singaporeans who are well-versed in it – not just lawyers, but policymakers, diplomats, and even technologists whose work crosses borders.

To be sure, Singapore has already contributed to developing major areas of international law — from the Unclos to the Singapore Convention on Mediation and the new Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) treaty. But Dr Balakrishnan’s speech should be a clarion call for us to go further and produce the next generation of international lawyers, negotiators, and thinkers who can not only safeguard our long-term interests, but also be proactive in charting the new international legal order.

A ROOT-AND-BRANCH APPROACH TO CREATING A NATIONAL PRIORITY

What would it take to get there? These are some possibilities.

First, a national mindset shift. If the instinctive reaction of our people is to dismiss international law as irrelevant or idealistic, few will see the value in studying it or pursuing it seriously. Even among lawyers, international law is often perceived as esoteric or impractical.

There is also a perception that opportunities to engage in

international law are scarce.

But a career in international law is not limited to arguing before tribunals. It further encompasses negotiation, policymaking, advisory work, treaty drafting, and enforcement. These are areas that require legal acumen, diplomacy, and cross-disciplinary knowledge.

Second, we can build more structured pathways – perhaps scholarships, internships, and government fellowships – for Singaporeans to work in international legal fields. In legal education and scholarship, international law should be understood in both its doctrinal and practical aspects.

For instance, international law is often reflected in treaties. While learning how to interpret treaties is important, just as important is understanding the negotiating processes preceding their finalisation. Industry experience and training in negotiation, communication, and cross-cultural understanding should therefore complement academic instruction.

Third, greater public awareness is needed of how international law touches everyday life and national ambition. During preparations for the Lachs Space Moot, for instance, the SMU team worked with Singapore’s Office for Space Technology and Industry, learning how our space ambitions require both scientific and legal expertise. Many similar intersections in trade, climate, cyber security, and oceans remain largely hidden from public view.

Finally, we should better recognise and celebrate our young talents who excel in international law. In countries like Australia and the Philippines, the performances of their Jessup Moot teams are reported in national media and even mentioned in Parliament. Such recognition signals that international law is not a niche pursuit but a pillar of national security and global standing.

Singapore has the brains, discipline, and reputation to shape the rules that shape the world. What we lack is not talent, but collective will.

If international law is truly existential to our survival, then nurturing even greater expertise in it must become a more obvious national priority. We should aspire to take on more leadership.

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