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Lawyers must act with integrity and uphold rule of law, says Edwin Tong

He urges SMU law students to find sense of purpose, pursue internships, venture abroad

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Lawyers must be defined by their character, which means being responsible not only to their clients, but also to their obligations to the court and the administration of justice.

Law Minister Edwin Tong on Aug 4 said at a Singapore Management University (SMU) ceremony to welcome incoming law students that at its heart, law is about trust.

“When you buy a home, you go to a lawyer. You trust that your ownership will be protected,” he said.

“When you sign a contract, you trust that it will be honoured. When you walk into a courtroom, you trust that everyone will receive a fair hearing.”

He said the students will eventually inherit the responsibility of upholding that trust, adding: “That is both a privilege, but also an obligation.”

Tong said lawyers are expected to act with integrity even when it is inconvenient, to uphold the rule of law even when it is unpopular, and

never to mislead the court, even if doing so might appear to be in the client’s interests.

In his speech, he shared with the students how they can make the most of the next four years as they undertake their studies.

Tong said they should find their purpose, including finding out why some lawyers stay in the profession despite challenges such as long hours and demoralising experiences in court.

It has never been, and will never be, an easy profession, he said, adding that the responsibilities are simply too great.

“Once you find that sense of purpose, something will change in you. The long hours will not just disappear,” he said. “The difficult cases will not become easier. But then you begin to understand why the work matters. What once felt like sacrifices will begin to feel like service, and that sense of purpose is what I believe carries many lawyers through long and fulfilling careers.”

Students should also forge their communities, by building relationships with fellow students includ-



Addressing incoming SMU law students on Aug 4, Law Minister Edwin Tong said that at its heart, law is about trust. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

ing seniors, so they can learn from mistakes, said Tong.

He noted: “Ours is a relatively small profession. We have about 6,400 practising lawyers in Singapore and about 5,000 other Singapore-qualified in-house counsel.

“The classmate sitting beside you today may one day become your colleague. Your opposing counsel. Your client. Your judge. Or even your minister!”

Tong called on students to step outside the classroom, including spending time as an intern with firms and agencies in different capacities, or as volunteers.

He said this exposure should extend beyond Singapore, not just in the traditional legal hubs like the UK and the US, but also in ASEAN, China and India, where much of Asia’s future growth will take place.

He said law increasingly sits at the intersection of many disciplines, from artificial intelligence to biotechnology.

“A lawyer acting for a biotechnology company needs to understand science to follow the issues, and maybe in some cases, challenge assumptions,” he said, adding that the law touches on many other disciplines.

“The law does not operate in isolation, and so neither should lawyers,” he added.

Tong said students should also embrace technology, without outsourcing their judgment and empathy.

He noted that while AI can find precedents and summarise hundreds of cases within seconds, it cannot judge when a dispute is better settled than fought.

“It cannot know when preserving a business relationship matters more than winning a contractual point in court,” he said.

“It cannot tell a client, ‘You can do this in law, but I don’t think you should.’ These are all human judgments.”

Another consideration for students was that they should hold fast to ethics and values of the legal profession.

Tong said technical excellence matters, but ultimately, what defines a lawyer is character.

The minister said a law degree today offers graduates more opportunities than before, with Asia’s economic rise creating growing demand for legal services.

But he cautioned that the profession will also face significant challenges, particularly from the rapid advancement of AI.

He said: “You would have read articles, suggesting that AI may replace lawyers, or at least significantly reshape legal work.

“You would also have seen the discussions following the Legal Profession Sustainability Report, and perhaps asked yourself: Can I still build a long, meaningful and sustainable career in law?”

Tong assured students that the legal profession was adapting to the changes, noting that stakeholders had met to discuss the way forward following the Singapore Academy of Law’s (SAL) Legal Profession Symposium last week.

He said the SAL had recently convened the symposium to discuss some of these issues.

“After the symposium, I met with senior members of the judiciary and that includes the incoming Chief Justice-designate, members of the SAL, the Law Society president, the Singapore Corporate Counsel Association, because in-house counsel is a big part of our profession, and senior partners from law firms in Singapore, to agree on next steps,” he said.

“There was strong commitment from all parties to work together.”

Preliminary ideas include giving students more substantial exposure to legal practice, supporting law firms in expanding abroad, building stronger links between Singapore lawyers and Singapore companies that are internationalising, providing training in AI and leadership, and developing clearer workplace codes of conduct.

ATTRITION FIGURES

In surveys of newly minted lawyers in 2024 and 2025, around 60 per cent of respondents said they were likely to leave legal practice in the next five years.

The commonly cited reasons were excessive workload or poor work-life balance, a higher salary or compensation package elsewhere, the impact work had on their mental well-being, a lack of flexibility in their working arrangements, and poor workplace culture.

Tong said at the Legal Profession Symposium on July 29 that attrition figures have remained broadly stable, and that the trend is not unique to the legal profession.

Between 2015 and 2024, around 60 per cent of lawyers stayed in practice after five years, and about 40 per cent remained after 10 years.

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