

Attrition among lawyers stable, but issues remain: Shanmugam

Important to address issues like long hours, toxic cultures, unfair treatment, he says

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Attrition in the legal profession has remained stable over the past decade and the size of the profession has grown steadily, but that does not mean there is no problem, said Coordinating Minister for National Security K. Shanmugam on July 26.

Issues such as poor supervision, a lack of training, harassment, bullying, and the unreasonable treatment of lawyers need to be taken seriously.

Serious questions have been raised following a recent study commissioned by the Law Society of Singapore on why lawyers leave the profession, Shanmugam said at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Law freshmen inauguration ceremony held at the University Cultural Centre.

The reasons included long hours, toxic workplace cultures, pressure, and the derogatory or unfair treatment they received in court, he added. Another reason cited in the study is the lack of mentorship.

Shanmugam, who is also Minister for Home Affairs, said it is good that the Law Society has formed a task force to come up with ways to deal with these issues.

The judiciary and the society are also setting up a joint committee to study the feedback and see what can be done to deal with the issues identified.



Speaking at the NUS Law freshmen inauguration ceremony on July 26, Coordinating Minister for National Security K. Shanmugam said the number of Singapore lawyers in practice grew by 26 per cent from 2015 to 2024. There are also currently about 4,800 in-house counsel, a one-third increase since 2015. ST PHOTO: BRIAN TEO

"It is important that the profession and the courts deal with this," Shanmugam said.

The minister added that other lawyers have decided to move to different sectors because the skills acquired in legal practice, such as clear thinking and precise writing, serve them well in many fields.

At the ceremony, Shanmugam sealed a time capsule containing letters that the freshmen wrote to their future selves, which will be opened when they graduate.

A total of 245 freshmen took the ethics pledge led by the vice-president of the NUS Law Club, Gwen Chong, a third-year law student.

A spokesperson for SG Courts said that there were two formal conduct complaints received in the past three years.

Citing statistics released by Law Minister Edwin Tong in Parliament in May, Shanmugam said that between 2015 and 2024, about 60 per cent of lawyers remained in practice after working for five years.

About 40 per cent remained after a decade.

The number of Singapore lawyers in practice grew by 26 per cent from 2015 to 2024. There are currently about 4,800 in-house counsel in Singapore, a one-third increase since 2015.

Other than examining the data, Shanmugam said, the next step is to look at why about four in 10 lawyers leave the profession after five years.

He noted that many leave to join other fields such as investment banking and the public service, while some start their own businesses.

Addressing the freshmen in the audience, Shanmugam said the legal practice is a demanding profession. "If you choose to be in legal practice, and you want to be at the top end, the cutting edge, then you must expect the demands to be very high."

The remuneration, he said, is linked to the demands of the practice.

A first-year qualified lawyer at a top local firm can earn more than \$100,000 annually. Top performers who become junior partners after six to eight years can make about \$200,000 to \$300,000 yearly.

In the public sector, the legal service and judicial service also pay competitively so that they can attract talent.

"When you get paid like that, then the expectations and demands will also be high. Work is expected almost round the clock.

"It is even more intense in Lon-

don, New York. The pressure comes with the territory," Shanmugam said.

He said the legal profession in Singapore has been successful owing to the Republic's economic policies, which have generated growth. The profession, which is around 6,400-strong here, has grown in tandem with this.

He noted that Singapore is a leading global arbitration hub, second to London.

"This was a result of deliberate, active government policy over many years, since the mid-2000s, including making the necessary legislative changes."

Another reason for Singapore's successful legal profession is the country's adherence to the rule of law, which has been "essential to our success", Shanmugam said.

"Investors know: Here, the rule of law applies," he added.

"Multinational corporations, other investors trust that their money is safe here. The legal framework provides certainty and stability. Contracts are enforced. The courts are well functioning and credible."

When asked about the role law schools play in addressing the realities of the legal profession, NUS Law dean Andrew Simester noted that harassment and bullying are push factors for lawyers.

"We need to try to help people to be lawyers of good character. That is one of the key things we need to do, and we do try to work on that," he said.

"We have increased the content of ethical education in the degree, but at the same time, it is also a joint enterprise between us, the Law Society and the firms. It is not something that the law school can do on its own."

Law freshman Sophie Loh said she felt daunted after reading about lawyers leaving the profession. Yet, she believes that the degree is worth pursuing, as law graduates can eventually enter other fields of work.

"I do still want to be a lawyer right now, but I am still a freshman, so I am eager to see what other pathways I can explore."

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