

# SAL 35<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY DINNER

## Welcome Address

Wednesday, 22 November 2023

The Honourable the Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon  
Supreme Court of Singapore

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Fellow members of the Academy  
Distinguished guests

1. Good evening, and a warm welcome to this evening's dinner. Tonight, we gather to mark the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Academy, to celebrate one of its giants, and to thank the many people who have contributed to our work over the past year. It is an honour for us to have all of you here tonight, and I am especially pleased that members of our first Senate – whom we invite to join us at this dinner every five years – are with us for this special celebration.

2. In my address at last year's dinner, I noted that the Academy is in a period of transformation.<sup>1</sup> Over the past year, we have charted a roadmap for the path ahead and developed several significant initiatives to enable our profession to meet the challenges of the future and to serve the needs of our users better. Tonight, I would like to share some of these plans with you and we will reveal

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<sup>1</sup> Sundaresh Menon CJ, Opening Address at the Singapore Academy of Law Appreciation & Awards Dinner 2022 (30 August 2022) ("**SAL Dinner 2022 Opening Address**") at para 15.

more details in due course. But let me first say a few words about Justice Andrew Phang, upon whom we have just conferred the Academy's highest honour.

**I. Justice Andrew Phang**

3. At the Valedictory Reference that was convened last year to honour Justice Phang, we paid tribute to the immense contributions that he has made to our law and the administration of justice in Singapore. My colleague Justice Steven Chong has just reminded us of some of those contributions; and, on behalf of the Academy, I would like to add some brief remarks on the indelible impression that Justice Phang has left on our institution.

4. Justice Phang served as Vice-President of the Academy and as a member of our Executive Board from 2005 to 2022, and he chaired many Committees that drove our growth. But he is perhaps best-known for his role in helping to promote the development of Singapore law, a cause that has been a driving force for much of his career. There were several facets to this aspect of his work for the Academy. Among them, Justice Phang was appointed Chair of the Council of Law Reporting in 2006, and spearheaded a multi-year effort to publish the Singapore Law Reports (Reissue), which reported 5,500 local decisions spanning some 44 years from 1965 to 2009. And as the founding chair of Academy Publishing, he oversaw its remarkable growth over the last one and a half decades. Since its formation in 2007, Academy Publishing has published 75 books, hundreds of journal articles, and many volumes of the Singapore Law

Reports. It is now the leading publisher of Singapore legal works, and has played a central role in advancing legal research and scholarship in our jurisdiction.

5. Much of this is due to Justice Phang, who oversaw the expansion of Academy Publishing's output and its push into new areas like digital publishing, and we are deeply grateful. I am also very pleased that he continues to contribute to the work of the Academy in this field, as Advisor to the Legal Research and Publications Committee. I wanted to recognise this even though it is just a small part of all that Justice Phang has done for the legal profession in Singapore and may I ask all of you to join me in a round of applause to honour his tremendous contributions to the Academy!

## **II. SAL's priorities and strategies in a changing legal landscape**

6. Let me turn to the Academy's key priorities and strategies over the next few years. At last year's dinner, I touched on our need to focus on two main areas: the adoption of technology, and continuing legal education to equip our members with the skills they will need to thrive in the emerging legal landscape.<sup>2</sup> Over the past year, building on these ideas, our Executive Board and leadership team have identified three significant, strategic priorities:

- (a) First, we will develop and deliver a suite of new learning and development programmes for our members. I will say more about this in a moment.

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<sup>2</sup> SAL Dinner 2022 Opening Address at para 15.

- (b) Second, we will continue to create legal content to provide models and standards for our lawyers, especially corporate lawyers who make up half of our members. In recent years, we have made some notable progress on this front. For example, at our 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner in 2018,<sup>3</sup> I launched the Venture Capital Investment Model Agreements (or “VIMA”), a suite of standard form documents which were updated and expanded last year. Similarly, in 2020, we launched a bank of Commercial Precedents on LawNet, and in March this year, the Asian Business Law Institute published a set of model clauses for contracting in Asia. We will enhance our efforts to support our corporate lawyers, and we will strive to help them not just in their *domestic* practice, but also in their efforts to capture a meaningful share of *regional* work.
- (c) Third, we will ramp up the digitalisation of our services to enhance their accessibility and ease of use for the public. We intend to introduce fully end-to-end electronic processes for wills registration and storage, the legalisation and notarisation of documents, and for our stakeholding services.

7. In pursuing these three broad priorities, we will rely on two main enablers: namely, *technology* and *communities*.

- (a) First, we will enhance and expand our adoption of a range of digital tools. For example, we are exploring the integration of generative AI into LawNet, which would bring a fundamental transformation of

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<sup>3</sup> Sundaresh Menon CJ, Opening Address at the Singapore Academy of Law 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Appreciation Dinner 2018 (23 October 2018) at para 7.

the legal research experience. We are collaborating with IMDA to fine-tune a large language model (or “LLM”) using the LawNet dataset. We aim to develop an LLM for Singapore law that will be used to enhance LawNet for all subscribers, and there are also plans to make the LLM available to LegalTech startups and innovation departments of law practices for suitable use cases.

- (b) Second, we will develop new ways of engaging and partnering with our members, including by creating communities of practice. I will elaborate on this shortly.

8. This is just a brief overview of the broad direction and high-level plans of the Academy, and more information will be shared over the course of the coming year. In the remainder of my address, I will touch on two specific initiatives in the pipeline: the Junior Lawyers Professional Certification Programme (or “JLPCP”), which is a novel training programme for junior lawyers, and the new Corporate Law Practice Committee that will be established.

### **III. The Junior Lawyers Professional Certification Programme**

9. Earlier this year, I suggested that generative AI and other emerging digital tools are likely to take over many routine legal tasks.<sup>4</sup> Generative AI will significantly enhance the efficiency and quality of legal work, but it will also bring new challenges. One such challenge relates to the training and development of

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<sup>4</sup> Sundaresh Menon CJ, “Legal Systems in a Digital Age: Pursuing the Next Frontier”, Opening Address at the 3rd Annual France-Singapore Symposium on Law and Business (11 May 2023) (“Legal Systems in a Digital Age”) at para 25.

our young lawyers. Traditionally, basic legal tasks such as document review and the drafting of simple documents fell within the province of our younger colleagues and this was a vital means by which we could help them develop forensic and other legal skills in their formative years. Much of this work is being augmented or replaced by AI, and this trend will likely become more pronounced. It is therefore crucial that we start thinking of and finding new ways to ensure that we have effective means of training and developing our young lawyers.<sup>5</sup>

10. This need is brought into even sharper focus once we recognise the reality that training standards and methods vary across our profession. Some larger law firms possess a breadth of expertise and sufficient financial resources to deliver comprehensive in-house training, but others may struggle to offer programmes at a similar level. Further, the inability of junior lawyers to work alongside senior colleagues in-person during the height of the pandemic may have hampered their professional development and I believe this is likely to continue in some ways even as we emerge from the shadow of the pandemic. These two factors point to the critical need to develop industry-wide learning and development programmes for junior lawyers, which can inculcate high baseline standards across our profession.

11. This endeavour will require a multi-agency effort from various stakeholders involved in continuing legal education, including the Academy. To this end, SAL will offer the JLPCP for young lawyers with less than five years of post-

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<sup>5</sup> Legal Systems in a Digital Age at para 26.

qualification experience from 2025. This programme will enable participants to acquire broad-based competencies as well as specialised skills in either disputes or corporate work, and it will also impart management skills and reinforce principles of professional ethics. Our goal is to offer a programme that will set the industry standard for the holistic development of young lawyers, and which will be seen as a trust mark of quality by employers and clients. Participants will receive certification from SAL, and this will put them in good stead to apply subsequently for accreditation under our Specialist Accreditation Scheme.

12. In connection with the JLPCP, SAL will look into providing subsidies for interested candidates from smaller firms so that no young lawyer will feel that she cannot afford to be trained. We will also be establishing a full-time faculty to professionalise our work in continuing legal education. I have asked that the Judiciary be involved in this effort, and the Academy will therefore be reaching out to judges and some of our other members for feedback and assistance with developing training materials and curricula. I look forward to your strong support in making this programme a success.

#### **IV. The Corporate Law Practice Committee**

13. That leads me to the second main initiative that I wish to touch on tonight. As I mentioned earlier, corporate lawyers make up half our members and they play a critical role in supporting Singapore's vision to be a business and legal hub for the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. It is therefore vital that the Academy

directs efforts to uplift our corporate lawyers, and seeks new ways to serve the needs of this important segment of our membership.

14. We have already made some steps in this direction, including by rolling out the model contractual precedents that I mentioned earlier. But there is a need to coordinate and enhance our efforts on this front, and we are therefore forming a new Corporate Law Practice Committee. As a start, the Committee will seek to identify the needs of both practising and in-house corporate lawyers, and it will reach out to stakeholders such as the Singapore Corporate Counsel Association and the Law Society to gather input. Mr Ng Wai King and Mr Lam Chee Kin will be the Co-Chairs of this Committee, and Justice Chua Lee Ming will serve as its Advisor. I am most grateful to all three of them for stepping up to steer the work of this important community of practice, which also illustrates the types of partnerships that we hope to form and leverage further.

## **V. Conclusion**

15. It has been an eventful and productive year for the Academy. Time does not permit me to highlight the efforts of every person who has played a part in our work. But let me acknowledge the significant contributions made by Mr Yeong Zee Kin, who took over as Chief Executive of SAL in April this year. Zee Kin is no stranger to us, having led the LawNet Secretariat from 2003 to 2005 before serving on various SAL committees. I am delighted that he has hit the ground running and played an instrumental role in many of our new initiatives, and I look forward to his continued contributions in the years ahead.

16. Finally, let me express my heartfelt appreciation to all of you – the staff of the Academy, our committee members, our partners, and my colleagues on the Senate – for all your contributions to the Academy. Over the last 35 years, SAL has become a central institution of our legal system and that is cause for celebration. None of this could have been possible without your support, and I look forward to your continued assistance and encouragement as we strive to take the Academy to greater heights in the years to come. In closing, let me mention that as part of our 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, SAL has rolled out complimentary access for all members to Academy Library, a digital repository of Academy Publishing titles, until 31 March 2024. I encourage you to use this resource, and please do reach out to the Academy if you need any assistance.

17. Thank you very much, and I wish you a wonderful evening.