

SPEECH AT OPENING CONFERENCE OF THE JUNIOR LAWYERS PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATION PROGRAMME

“A Lawyer’s Craft in a Changing World”

Wednesday, 21 May 2025

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Supreme Court of Singapore

Members of the Senate,

Distinguished guests,

Participants of the inaugural run of the Junior Lawyers Professional
Certification Programme,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I. Introduction

1. Good morning. I am delighted to speak to you today at the launch of the Junior Lawyers Professional Certification Programme (or “**JLP**”). Let me first express my deep gratitude to Zee Kin and the entire team at the Singapore Academy of Law (or “**SAL**”) for their tremendous effort – not only in putting together today’s event but also for all the work that has gone into

^{*} I am deeply grateful to my colleagues, Assistant Registrars Wee Yen Jean, Ong Kye Jing and Bryan Ching, for all their assistance in the research for and preparation of this address.

conceptualising and developing the JLP. Let me also especially thank each of you – the first batch of participants in the JLP – for being here today. We have a very full programme ahead of us and I hope you will end the day feeling that this was time and effort well spent.

2. You have just heard from Zee Kin why we decided to offer the JLP, and the substantive knowledge and practical skills we hope you will each gain from it. I wish to focus on a more fundamental point in my remarks this morning, and that is the *mindset* that lawyers should adopt in the pursuit of a successful and sustainable career in the law. My principal suggestion this morning is that lawyers should think of the practice of law as a craft and embrace *craftsmanship* as an overarching guiding principle for their careers. This concept of craftsmanship is, and has always been, a cornerstone of successful lawyering. And its importance will only grow amidst the rapid and dramatic changes that we are witnessing both in our global environment and in legal practice, some of which I will touch on later this morning.

3. What exactly do I mean by craftsmanship as a guiding principle? I suggest that we can unpack this in three parts – first, lawyers should make a long-term commitment to the endeavour of perfecting their craft; second, they should take pride in their craft and strive for excellence without compromise; and third, they should derive purpose and meaning from the

very process of practising their craft. Let me elaborate on each of these in turn.

II. Long-term Commitment

4. I begin with the first of these points, which is that the practice of law requires a *steady and long-term commitment* to the endeavour of perfecting one's craft.¹ It demands a considerable amount of hard work, especially in the formative years when there is undoubtedly a steep learning curve. This is so for at least three reasons.

5. To begin with, the law is a discipline that is intellectually challenging and rigorous. Indeed, this has always been the case, but it is increasingly so because of the *growing complexity of our work*. We see this in the complexification of disputes, with judges and litigators being confronted with matters that are ever more complex, both from an evidential and technical standpoint.² This has largely come about because of the rapid advancements in technology, which have enabled vast quantities of materials to be stored and then produced when disputes arise.

¹ In a recent New York Times column, the author put it in the following manner: "[w]hen you see people ensconced in their craft ... [t]hey are not manic; they are persistent. They're not burning out with frantic energy; they are just plowing their furrow, a little bit farther, day after day". See David Brooks, "A Surprising Route to the Best Life Possible" (*New York Times*, 27 March 2025). See also Brett Scharffs, "Law as Craft" (2001) 54 *Vanderbilt Law Review* 2245 at 2262.

² Sundaresh Menon CJ, "The Complexification of Disputes in the Digital Age", Goff Lecture 2021 (9 November 2021).

6. But the trend of complexification applies equally to transactional work. Consider, for instance, the work of lawyers in the field of mergers and acquisitions (or “**M&A**”) where the deals have clearly become more complex³; just to illustrate the point, a recent study found that in the last decade alone, the average processing time for due diligence has risen from 124 days to 203 days.⁴ While this is in part due to the increasing volume of information that need to be reviewed, it can also be attributed to other sources of complexity that have emerged in M&A transactions, with the need for lawyers to consider such areas as trade sanctions, environmental, social and governance regulation and data protection and privacy. Such complexity is further compounded when the target or acquirer has a presence in multiple jurisdictions, as is frequently the case, because the relevant legal and regulatory regimes may not be identical or even similar across jurisdictions.

7. The second reason why the law is particularly demanding lies in its *multifaceted nature*.⁵ Our substantive legal knowledge and technical

³ KPMG, “Succeeding in Complex M&A: Learn How a Relentless Focus on Speed to Value Delivers Next-level M&A Outcomes” (2024) at 2; Sophie Cameron, “The Growing Importance of In-House Counsel in Today’s M&A Landscape” (*International Bar Association*, 23 August 2023).

⁴ Chris Mahony, “Cautious M&A Investors Taking Extra Care with Due Diligence” (*Bayes Business School*, 22 June 2024).

⁵ Sundaresh Menon CJ, “The Legal Profession – A Community of Learned Friends”, speech delivered at Mass Call 2024 (19 August 2024) (“**Mass Call Address 2024**”) at para 5.

competencies serve merely as the baseline for our work. Lawyers now require multi-disciplinary knowledge and skills in adjacent fields that they routinely and increasingly encounter, such as financial accounting, forensic science, psychiatry, statistics and technology. Indeed, in some practice areas, what were once considered adjacent fields have become part and parcel of legal work. For instance, corporate lawyers have assumed a more prominent role in advising their clients on governance, risk and compliance issues. And perhaps more importantly, to excel in their craft, lawyers must master other abilities such as how to exercise sound judgment and how to address the needs of clients in a commercially sensible manner. Yet, it is an inescapable reality that these capabilities are developed largely through experience and sustained dedication.

8. Finally, while the first two reasons concern the *changing nature of legal work*, the *environment* which lawyers operate in has also become more challenging. Among other things, this is so because of an increasingly competitive global legal market – with many Singapore law practices now competing against international firms with significant resources – as well as mounting expectations from clients who seek fast and cost-effective solutions.⁶ These developments have given rise to challenges that affect the sustainability of legal practice, such as the seeming need for lawyers

⁶ Mass Call Address 2024 at para 4.

to be constantly connected and responsive,⁷ and the sense that they are being inundated with information, a problem described as “information overload”.⁸

9. It is in this context that we ought to re-emphasise the centrality of craftsmanship in lawyering. But let me be clear about two points. First, the sustainability of legal practice *is* a genuine concern that requires concrete solutions.⁹ I will return to this shortly, but the reality is that any such solutions are unlikely to be effective unless we address the mindsets of lawyers themselves. This leads to my second point. I am referring here to the mindsets not just of our young colleagues but of the profession as a whole. The seniors in the profession must appreciate that, like master craftsmen, they have a duty and a responsibility to impart their knowledge and experience to their juniors. Indeed, much of a young lawyer’s development comes through mentors and seniors who maintain a personal interest in their welfare and who invest the time and the effort to guide and support them in their work.

⁷ Meraiah Foley et al, “‘Everything Now, All the Time’: The Connectivity Paradox and Gender Equality in the Legal Profession” (2024) 39 *New Technology, Work and Employment* 362.

⁸ LK Klien et al, “Reducing Information Overload in Your Organisation” (*Harvard Business Review*, 1 May 2023).

⁹ Sundares Menon, “Reimagining the Rule of Law: A Renewed Conception”, speech delivered at the Conversations with the Community (20 September 2024) (“**Reimagining the Rule of Law**”) at paras 30–34.

10. As for our younger colleagues, they must appreciate that a legal career is demanding and that it will require a long-term commitment to mastering one's craft. In this, they must have the confidence that they will be supported and nurtured in environments that will allow them to achieve their fullest potential. Yet, anecdotally at least, we hear of a growing number of young lawyers who do not see a long-term future in legal practice, and for many of them their main objective from the outset seems to be to move to an in-house role or a non-legal career, sooner rather than later. To be clear, this is not a trend that is inherently problematic. In-house counsel play a vital role in the administration of justice,¹⁰ and lawyers have distinguished themselves across diverse fields in Singapore, such as in banking, diplomacy and the arts. The real concern lies with the underlying reasons why young lawyers are thinking of leaving private practice, in that these appear to stem from a growing dissatisfaction with how they are managed and developed.

11. This seems to be borne out by the findings from recent surveys which I have spoken of previously.¹¹ This year, we repeated the survey that we have been conducting at Mass Call at the Mass Admission Ceremony. We

¹⁰ Sundaresh Menon CJ, "The Centrality of Trust in the Legal Profession", speech at Mass Admission Ceremony 2025 (21 April 2025) ("**Mass Admission Ceremony Speech**") at paras 21–27.

¹¹ Reimagining the Rule of Law at para 31.

received 272 responses, representing close to 80% of the total number of applicants for admission, and the majority of them were practice trainees in law firms. On the issue of the sustainability of legal practice, the results obtained were similar to those obtained from the previous cohort. Around 60% of the respondents indicated that they were likely to move out of *legal practice* within the next five years,¹² so as to pursue an in-house career, academia, or employment with other legal service providers. And within that same time period, slightly more than a third indicated that they were likely to leave the *legal profession* altogether. Notably, when we dove into the *reasons* provided by the respondents for why they were considering leaving their current legal role, we found that most were in the nature of push factors rather than pull factors. The most 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 wellbeing; a lack of flexibility in their working arrangements; or poor workplace culture.

12. I have on previous occasions explained why such findings ought to be of significant concern to all of us.¹³ I have also suggested how we might

¹² Legal practice in this context includes employment in the Judicial Service, the Legal Service and the Public Defender's Office.

¹³ Reimagining the Rule of Law at paras 32-33; Sundaresh Menon CJ, "Maintaining the Effective Functioning of the Judiciary: An Accessible and Values-Based Justice System", speech at

go about addressing this challenge,¹⁴ such as by ensuring that law firms develop concrete policies to implement sustainable workplace practices, and by communicating and instilling the values foundational to the practice of law. Indeed, we will have the occasion to discuss potential solutions in greater detail at the Legal Profession Symposium that will be held later in July. That Symposium, which is being organised by the SAL and facilitated by Professor David Wilkins from Harvard Law School, has been convened to better understand the aspirations and concerns of our young lawyers, and to work with them to co-create solutions with the support of the wider profession. We need these conversations to take place and we very much hope that these interventions will enable more of our younger colleagues to pursue long and fulfilling careers in the law, for it is they who represent the future of our profession.

III. Pride, Excellence and Learning

13. I turn to the second aspect of craftsmanship that I wish to discuss, which is to take pride in one's work and to strive for excellence without

the Plenary Judicial Session of the 37th LAWASIA Conference (13 October 2024) ("**Maintaining the Effective Functioning of the Judiciary**") at paras 17–20.

¹⁴ Reimagining the Rule of Law at para 34; Maintaining the Effective Functioning of the Judiciary at paras 21–23.

compromise. It has been observed that the “distinguishing mark of the craftsman is pride in a job well done for its own sake”.¹⁵

14. In the context of the law, given that it is our specialised knowledge and skills that lie at the heart of our value proposition, the pursuit of excellence encompasses the need to commit ourselves to *continuous* and *self-directed* learning, and this is necessary if we are to be well-equipped to serve society.¹⁶ This also means that law firms and legal departments must commit to investing in the professional development of their lawyers, such as by encouraging and facilitating their attendance at the relevant training courses, in the knowledge that this will be beneficial to both the individual and also to the organisation. Justice Debbie Ong will speak more about this later in connection with the launch of the SAL Training Pledge. But for now, I will highlight two areas that all lawyers should aim to acquire at least a working understanding of.

15. The first is technology and, in particular, generative artificial intelligence (or “AI”). Generative AI tools have started to transform the practice of law. Indeed, there is empirical data that shows that they are

¹⁵ William Twining, “The Idea of Juristic Method: A Tribute to Karl Llewellyn” (1993) 48 *University of Miami Law Review* 119 at 149. In a similar vein, Professor Richard Sennett refers to this as the “desire to do a job well for its own sake”. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (Yale University Press, 2008) at 9.

¹⁶ Sundaresh Menon CJ, “The Transformation of Litigation and the Litigator of the Future”, keynote address at the Litigation Conference 2024 (3 April 2024) at para 26.

already more capable and efficient than lawyers in certain legal tasks, such as in preparing summaries or in reviewing vast quantities of data.¹⁷ Lawyers should therefore acquire the relevant competencies that will enable them to harness these tools effectively. But beyond AI, there are other digital legal practice skills that lawyers should aim to acquire a basic proficiency in, such as data science and digital thinking. Notably, the strong demand for such skills can be seen from the fifth edition of the World Economic Forum's "Future of Jobs Report", that was released earlier this year. The Forum, having gathered the views of more than a thousand of the world's leading employers, found that technological skills will be of increasing importance in the next five years, more so than *any* other skill in the workforce. In particular, the fastest-growing skills were projected to be in three areas, all of which relate to technology – first, "AI and big data", second, "networks and cybersecurity" and third, "technological literacy".¹⁸

16. The second area which lawyers should gain a better understanding of is comparative law. While the cultivation of an international outlook has long been essential to lawyering, this will become even more important when we consider the reshaping of the global order that is likely to happen in the coming years, driven by developments such as the reconfiguration

¹⁷ Mass Admission Ceremony Speech at paras 7–10.

¹⁸ World Economic Forum, "Futures of Jobs Report 2025: Insight Report" (January 2025) at 37.

of global trade and supply chains. With the shift from a unipolar world to a multipolar one, lawyers will increasingly need to work on transactions and disputes that engage the laws and regulations of a wider variety of legal systems from across the world.¹⁹ In particular, with the emphasis on deeper regional integration, a basic grounding in civil law concepts and practices is likely to be essential, given that most of the jurisdictions in ASEAN and the broader Asian region have civil law systems. And beyond commercial matters, many areas of practice that were once considered “domestic” now have transnational elements, such as family practice.²⁰ The rise of the “international family” has generated complex issues such as those relating to international child abduction and relocation, and family lawyers will need to develop a sufficient understanding of the approaches taken in different jurisdictions in order to be able to advise their clients effectively.

IV. Purpose and Meaning

17. Finally, a commitment to craftsmanship as a guiding principle must mean that lawyers should aspire to *derive purpose and meaning from the very process of practising their craft*, quite apart from substantive outcomes

¹⁹ Sundaresh Menon CJ, “The Emerging Architecture of Transnational Commercial Justice”, opening address at the Singapore International Commercial Court Conference (14 January 2025) at para 7.

²⁰ Sundaresh Menon CJ, “International Family Justice as Collaborative Justice”, paper delivered at the 18th Conference of Chief Justices of Asia and the Pacific (17 November 2022).

or material rewards. This is in fact something that is very much aligned with the priorities of our younger colleagues. Last year, Deloitte reported the results of a global survey of more than 22,800 young respondents, which explored their attitudes towards work. An overwhelming majority – 86% of Millennials and 89% of Gen Zs – indicated that having a sense of purpose is important to their overall job satisfaction and well-being.²¹

18. This should, at least in theory, increase the attractiveness of a legal career, given that it represents a noble calling to participate in the administration of justice and, in doing so, to uphold and defend the rule of law and to serve the public good. Indeed, we have found through research conducted by the Ethics and Professional Standards Committee that our young lawyers are strongly drawn to work and workplaces that align with their values, and that they value work that contributes to the mission of administering justice.²² These are natural advantages that we have in our profession. Yet, against this, there is a growing sense that law firms are being run more like high-performing businesses rather than values-based purveyors of justice.²³ It has even been suggested that in many law firms, associates are evaluated *primarily* by the number of their billable hours,

²¹ Deloitte, “The Deloitte 2024 Gen Z and Millennial Survey: Living and Working with Purpose in a Transforming World” (2024) at 10.

²² Sundaresh Menon CJ, Response Delivered at the Opening of the Legal Year 2025 (13 January 2025) at para 11.

²³ Maintaining the Effective Functioning of the Judiciary at para 25.

rather than the quality of their work.²⁴ In such environments, it is understandable why some young lawyers may feel unable to derive purpose and meaning from what they do. This should prompt reflection on the need for law firms and legal departments to be more intentional and thoughtful in how they assign and evaluate the work of their young colleagues, to ensure that they can focus on developing their craft.

V. Conclusion

19. Allow me to conclude. I have suggested this morning that there is a real need for us to think of the law as a craft and not just as a means to earn a living. At one level, this is a fundamental attitude or disposition that is necessary to pursue a successful and sustainable career in the law, and it is my hope that these remarks might resonate with our younger colleagues. But beyond this, the concept of craftsmanship also brings into focus many other critical factors that will determine how well we prepare and shape our future generations of lawyers. Here, the focus shifts to our more senior colleagues, especially those able to effect change in our profession. They need to recognise the importance of nurturing a pool of mentors who are willing and able to teach and pass on the craft of

²⁴ MH Hoeflich, “The Craft of the Law: An Essay After Forty Years as a Law Teacher” (2022) 70 *Kansas Law Review* 483 at 497.

lawyering; to develop effective training programmes that will help lawyers improve and refine their craft; and to establish healthy workplace practices that will allow lawyers to practise their craft safely and sustainably.

20. Let me close by taking this opportunity to wish each of you the very best in your careers. I hope you find great joy and fulfilment in all that you do, and I look forward to our discussion this morning. Thank you very much.