

LEGAL PROFESSION SYMPOSIUM 2025: REDEFINING THE NORM

Welcome and Introduction

Tuesday, 29 July 2025

The Honourable Justice Valerie Thean

Supreme Court of Singapore

I. Introduction

1. “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers”, said Dick the Butcher in *Henry VI, Part II*.¹
2. As with all of Shakespeare’s work, there have been multiple interpretations of this line through the years.² In the context of the rebellion in the play, lawyers were a symbol of the oppression under which common folk laboured. They were seen as an elite class of technical wizards in the employ of feudal lords, adept at using the law to cheat the honest and the poor.³
3. This first perspective reminds us of the special position lawyers hold in society, with unique access, because of their qualifications and expertise, to the courts and to justice. If they do not perform their role as custodians of the rule of law, citizens will lose trust in the justice system and the broader system of governance within their society. It was with this in mind that last year, at the Inaugural Legal Profession Symposium, we discussed how we could enhance the values and standards within our profession.
4. Coming back to the Shakespearean line, a second interpretation points out that the exhortation to kill all lawyers is uttered by a bloodthirsty criminal who joined the rebellion for the joy of lawlessness.⁴ This second perspective views lawyers

¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part II* (Barbara Mowat ed) (Folger Shakespeare Library, 2022 ed) (“*Henry VI, Part II*”) at line 2299.

² Daniel J Kornstein, *Kill All the Lawyers? Shakespeare’s Legal Appeal* (Princeton University Press, 1994) (“*Kill All the Lawyers?*”) at pp 26–30.

³ *Kill All the Lawyers?* at p 28.

⁴ *Henry VI, Part II* at lines 2414–2420.

as an essential part of the justice system, necessary for law and order. The breakdown of society that the thug sought could only be obtained by eradicating the guardians of the rule of law.⁵

5. Both interpretations therefore reflect facets of the role and responsibility of lawyers today. Whether it is in facilitating the peaceful resolution of conflict, negotiating for mutual benefit, advocating for rights or defending them, lawyers ensure that society is governed by the rule of law, not the rule of the jungle. For this reason, the legal profession is a calling to be answered with honesty, integrity and dedication. Lawyers who are imbued with the values and skills of the profession are the not-at-all-secret sauce that binds communities together and takes societies forward.
6. This, therefore, is the focus of the Legal Profession Symposium, to build up the profession as a sustainable, values-based profession. In doing this, may I say at the outset, we intend to approach the future with clarity, creativity and innovation.

II. Meeting our objective

7. How will we achieve this? The answer lies in the profession itself. Let me explain.
8. In January 2023, Mr Jimmy Yim, SC and I were honoured to be tasked by the Chief Justice to chair the Ethics and Professional Standards Committee (the “EPSC”).
9. We heard extensively from the profession on what was needed. A broad range of practitioners were consulted. They were of varied ages - young, mid-career and senior, different disciplines - corporate, litigation, academics, legal and judicial services, in-house lawyers - and responsibilities (from associates to managing partners). SAL helped with a 2023 Young Lawyers survey in which over 500 young lawyers of under 10 PQE participated, and the Supreme Court followed on in their 2024 and 2025 mass call and mass admission surveys on related queries.

⁵ *Kill All the Lawyers?* at p 28.

10. The recommendations of our Interim and Final Reports were a distillation of this extensive conversation. These proposals may be summed up in three broad strands.

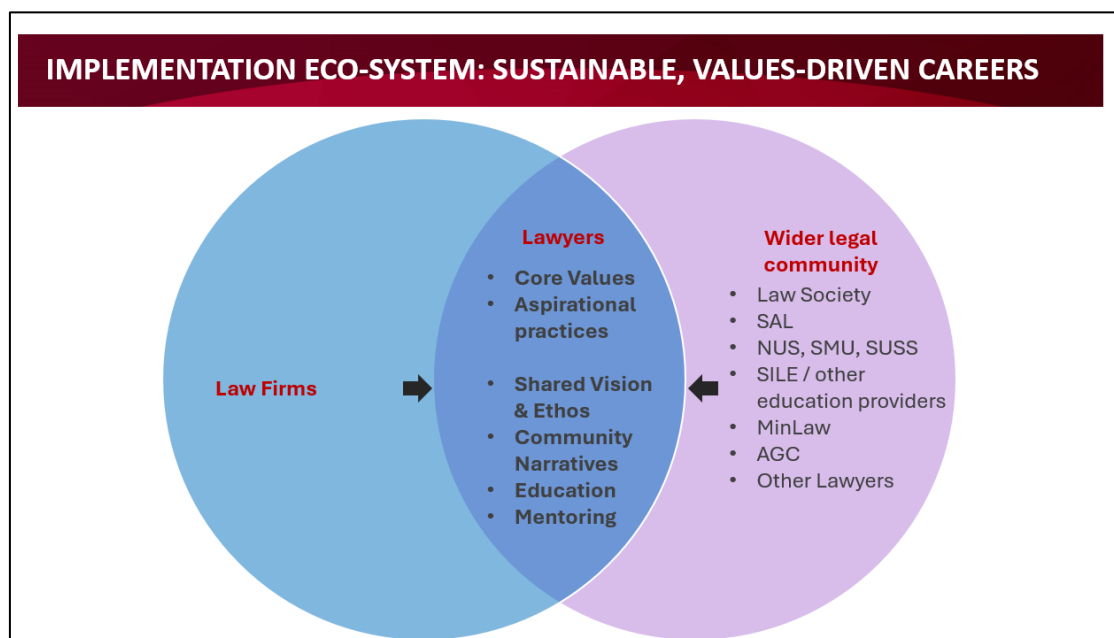
EPSC RECOMMENDATIONS		
<p>Learning</p> <p><u>Education</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law schools • SILE: Part B; online ethics course for overseas graduates; CPD for career long learning and ethics as mandatory component of CPD; CALAS website. • SAL: ethics-related content into training and specialist programmes and launching the “Ethics Repository” self-education platform • Law Society: continuing education <p><u>Mentoring</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SILE: Training Checklists for supervising solicitors • Law Society: structured mentoring schemes; training for mentors • SAL: specialist and career mentoring 	<p>Ethos</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core values: Integrity, Professionalism and Justice • Build shared vision • Community narratives, collegiality, common aspirations to entrench values and vision • Ingrain good habits and practice based on aspirational standards such as specialist professional standards guidelines, etiquette and ethical codes 	<p>Profession</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law firms: Training and mentoring within law firms • Law Society: Ethics Assist Helpline; Legal Practitioner Support Protocol; Legal Practice Management Course; syllabus for a structured mentoring programme within law firms; Policy on the Prevention of Workplace Harassment and Bullying • SAL: to curate developments in ethics and professional standards annually for law firms; develop a core set of workplace sustainability principles with a pilot group of law firms and legal departments; to oversee the implementation of EPSC recommendations.

11. The first is to build up the ethos of the profession. Ethos has various components. First, as a profession, we need shared vision and common narratives. This we build up through events such as today. We also needed a distillation of the core values of the profession for individual lawyers and those who aspire to join the profession. In consultation with the profession, these were identified as integrity, professionalism and justice. But how can values be practical, withstanding the daily grind of work? Over time, values become part of our reflexes and daily disciplines when we build up good habits and practices that reflect our profession. Thus, for example, the Criminal Code of Practice⁶ was revised and updated, and a new Dispute Resolution Guide, to set out best practices and ideal standards for disputes work, has just finished consultation.
12. The second strand is about law as a craft. A lawyer must know his craft. Good education is the foundation. We thank, in particular, our three law schools for coming onboard for changes to their syllabi, and to the Singapore Institute of Legal Education and other stakeholders for implementing the mandatory 3-point component of the Continuing Professional Development scheme relating to ethics and professional standards. Head knowledge is but one aspect, however.

⁶ Code of Practice for the Conduct of Criminal Proceedings by the Prosecution and the Defence.

It is mentoring that reinforces learning, bringing knowledge to life in day-to-day practicalities. We are therefore grateful to the Law Society and SAL for putting in place mentoring schemes, and the many lawyers who have come alongside, giving of their time and effort. Through education and mentoring, learning is instilled and reinforced.

13. The last strand, Profession, came out of conversations within the legal community after the Interim Report was released. It concerns the systems and institutions within the legal community that undergird these initiatives and ensure a continuous virtuous cycle. We do not have time to mention all the initiatives this morning. We thank the Law Society for implementing the Ethics Assist Helpline, the Legal Practitioner Support Protocol, changes to the Legal Practice Management Course and putting in place its Policy for the Prevention of Workplace Harassment and Bullying. SAL has taken the implementation of the EPSC's recommendations forward, including organising this Symposium.
14. This Legal Profession Symposium today focuses on two aspects within our implementation eco-system.



15. Our young lawyers remain at the heart of our continuing efforts, because they are the future of our profession. A crucial aspect of the profession is our law firms. The majority of our young lawyers work in our largest law firms. Law firms are the crucible in which lawyers learn and grow. Mindful workplaces aid productivity

and efficiency. Training and mentoring, while also valuable in the wider community of the profession, are best placed within law firms, where the day-to-day outworking of values are experienced. Law firms nurture lawyers by providing structure and resources within their workplaces, and their support is necessary for lawyers to access wider efforts by the Law Society, SAL and other lawyers. At the same time, lawyers themselves must take hold of opportunities to learn and grow. Through mentors, diligent learning, and hard work, you will acquire relevant skills, develop your craft, and grow in business wherewithal.

16. In preparation for this Symposium, SAL organised three focus group discussions in April and May to collect insights. Conversations centred on the culture in law firms, technology adoption, and the business of law. The feedback highlighted challenges in the culture of law firms, the speed of adoption of technology, and a difficult international landscape. Opportunities were highlighted too, such as building mindful legal practices that can nourish values-driven, sustainable careers, encouraging faster AI adoption, and instilling good leadership practices.

III. How today will take us forward

17. Today's Symposium gathers up the threads from these past conversations. Its object is to build common ground upon which to move forward.
18. In building our shared vision, we must be unafraid to redefine the norm, as the title of the Symposium suggests. Last Saturday, two senior partners from McKinsey & Company wrote an article in *BT Weekend* entitled "Could all roads lead through South-east Asia?" Their premise is that the entrepreneur today needs to ask, "Where can I build and scale bold ideas?" They see real world complexity as an ideal proving ground for AI models, payment systems, consumer platforms and entirely new business models. In the same way, the current complex global landscape gives lawyers new opportunities for business, and to follow and aid other businesses. The future of the profession that we are reimagining is one in which lawyers are flourishing.
19. History has seen lawyers who have been their nations' way-finders in times of uncertainty. We are privileged to have with us today our way-finder *par excellence*, the Honourable the Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, who will open

and close this Symposium. Our Chief Justice cares deeply about, and has spoken extensively, on the need for values-driven sustainable practices.⁷ With his extensive experience in private practice, including as a former managing partner of one of Singapore's largest law firms, he is acutely aware not only of the challenges of legal practice, but also of the tremendous satisfaction and growth that it can offer to those who stay the course.

20. And who better to facilitate the day's conversations and give our keynote address than Professor David Wilkins, Vice Dean for Global Initiatives on the Legal Profession at Harvard Law School. As a leading global scholar on the legal profession, with extensive research on the transformation of legal services, Professor Wilkins will bring unique insights into both the emerging demands on legal professionals and the new opportunities arising from this shifting landscape.
21. Minister for Law and Second Minister for Home Affairs Mr Edwin Tong SC, will join us in the afternoon in a Fireside Chat. He brings a unique dual perspective. As Minister for Law, he is charged with driving Singapore's development as an international hub for legal services and dispute resolution. At the same time, in a former life, as an illustrious practitioner recognised by *Chambers Asia-Pacific* as "an outstanding lawyer" and "one of the pre-eminent practitioners" in Singapore, he would understand the demands of building a career in the legal profession.
22. Other senior lawyers will inspire us. Our panel discussion on "The Responsibility of Senior Leadership" will be moderated by Mr Abraham Vergis SC, Managing Director of Providence Law Asia, who brings over 25 years of experience in international disputes. The panel features lawyers with diverse backgrounds. Mr Nish Shetty, a Partner at Clifford Chance Asia specialising in international arbitration; Mr Gregory Tan, Joint Head, Legal & Regulatory at Temasek; Ms Lee Kee Yeng, a Mergers & Acquisitions partner at Allen & Gledhill; and Mr Daryl Chew, Managing Partner of Three Crowns LLP.

⁷ See for example Sundaresh Menon CJ, "Reimagining the Rule of Law: A Renewed Conception", Speech delivered at Conversations with the Community (20 September 2024) at paras 30–34 and Sundaresh Menon CJ, "Maintaining the Effective Functioning of the Judiciary: An Accessible and Values-Based Justice System", Speech delivered at the 37th LAWASIA Conference (13 October 2024) at paras 14–25.

23. And the lawyers who are in this room, thank you for your work in building up our profession. Today we share reflections with the aim of developing better ways to share each generation's experience, dreams, and aspirations.
24. Our work will not end today, of course. Changing norms, building new paradigms, these require time, meaningful conversation and thoughtful action. SAL will follow on with solutioning workshops, again with lawyers across the various generations and managing partners of our diverse range of law firms. Our intention is to co-create solutions, all the while fostering a closer community and a deeper appreciation of the values that we share as a profession.

IV. Conclusion

25. On that note, it is my privilege to invite the Honourable the Chief Justice to deliver the Opening Address. Thank you.