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Dazzling future awaits law grads, says Shanmugam

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THE fresh-faced law graduates of NUS had much to cheer about at their **commencement** ceremony yesterday when recently minted Law Minister K Shanmugam told them of the exciting future that awaits them in the new legal landscape.

He said that they would find a 'dazzling future ahead' with the liberalised legal sector, but told them to be ready to roll with the come-what-mays.

'For you - you have almost the world in your hands. Remain true to yourself, know what you want, work for it - but also be ready to accept changes and dislocations. By next year, the legal landscape will be quite changed. You will find that you can work in Singapore law firms, foreign law firms.'

His thoughts address the government's move to liberalise the legal sector late last year, after it accepted suggestions made by a review committee headed by Justice V K Rajah.

The changes enhanced joint ventures between foreign and local law firms, and allowed for foreign law firms to participate in arbitration cases before a notice of arbitration is issued. Under another new scheme, the Qualifying Foreign Law Firm (QFLF) scheme, up to five QFLFs will be permitted to practise Singapore law by hiring Singapore-qualified lawyers.

Simply put: more employment opportunities for the outgoing cohort of graduates.

Ten among the 347 were pioneers, holders of new Master of Laws degrees in the areas of Asian legal systems and maritime law. Another 39 hold a double degree from New York University and NUS.

NUS Faculty of Law dean Tan Cheng Han said of the more liberal legal sector: 'It will certainly be a lot better for law graduates. It will open up to them a bigger pool of employers to work with.'

'In many ways our local law firms have spent the last few years preparing for this particular day. I think any partner in a law firm with foresight will know that there will come a point where the profession will have to open up more, because of globalisation. They have done a lot in the last few years, especially the push to regionalise their practices. The greater competition will make our local firms even stronger in the coming years.'

As for those who decide not to go to the Bar, he believes that the booming Singapore economy would provide ample opportunity for their legal skills to be applied, and did not believe that the attrition rate was as high as some people made it out to be. 'While it is true that many legally trained people leave the law firms, they don't necessarily go out of the legal profession. The majority of them who leave the law firms actually go into the legal department of a company, applying their skills in a different setting.'

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