

**POLICIES FOR ENHANCING PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE  
AND LEGAL ETHICS OF LAWYERS: SINGAPORE'S EXPERIENCE AND  
LESSONS FOR VIETNAM**

**Dao Viet Hung Tran<sup>\*1</sup>, Phuong Linh Pham<sup>2</sup>**

Hanoi Law University, Vietnam

trandaoviethung@gmail.com<sup>1\*</sup>, linhpham.hlu.2004@gmail.com<sup>2</sup>

Abstract

In the context of national renewal and deep international integration, the demand for high-quality legal services in Vietnam has increased significantly. Responding to this requirement, the Communist Party of Vietnam promulgated Resolution No. 66-NQ/TW on renewing law-making and law enforcement to meet the demands of national development in the new era, emphasizing breakthrough solutions to enhance the quality of legal human resources. As an integral component of this workforce, Vietnamese lawyers must strengthen both professional competence and ethics to deliver effective and credible legal services. However, current lawyer training programs in Vietnam reveal notable shortcomings, particularly in integrating theoretical knowledge with practical skills and fostering ethical values. Employing a comparative research approach, this study examines Singapore's experience in lawyer training - a well-developed and practice-oriented legal education system. On this basis, the paper identifies key lessons and proposes feasible solutions to improve the quality of lawyer training in Vietnam, aligning it with international standards and domestic development needs.

**Keywords:** Lawyer, Professional Competency, Professional Ethics, Singapore

**INTRODUCTION**

In the context of international economic and legal integration, the role of the legal profession has become increasingly significant in ensuring access to justice, fostering a transparent business environment, and enhancing the effectiveness of judicial reform. However, in Viet Nam, the current system of lawyer training remains subject to several limitations, including the absence of clearly defined professional competency standards, insufficient emphasis on professional ethics, and the lack of structured mechanisms for regular and continuous professional development following the issuance of practising certificates.

By contrast, Singapore, as a developed jurisdiction with a legal profession that enjoys international recognition, has successfully established a comprehensive system for the training, accreditation, and supervision of legal practitioners based on well-defined competency frameworks and rigorous ethical standards. Examining Singapore's model not only enables Viet Nam to identify key factors for improving the training of its legal workforce but also contributes to policy orientation and institutional refinement, with a view to developing a professional legal profession that is responsive to contemporary demands and global trends.

From an etymological perspective, the concept of "competence" (*compétence*) originates from the Latin term *competens*, meaning appropriate or suitable. Since 1790, the term has acquired an expanded meaning, referring to the ability to adequately address and resolve a given problem. According to the *Vietnamese Dictionary*, competence is defined as "psychological and physiological attributes that enable an individual to perform a particular type of activity with a high level of quality."

Similar to the general notion of competence, professional competence has been interpreted through various theoretical approaches. Under the KSA model (Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes), professional competence encompasses not only knowledge but also other attributes such as skills, attitudes, and personal characteristics. This understanding of professional competence has been widely endorsed by scholars, particularly in the field of psychology. Notably, psychologist Richard Boyatzis defines professional competence as "an underlying characteristic of an individual, which may include motives, traits, skills, aspects of self-image or social role, or bodies of knowledge that the individual uses to perform a job effectively." Accordingly, the inclusion of the term "professional" in the concept of competence serves to specify the standards and expectations that a given profession imposes with respect to the skills, knowledge, and ethical conduct of its practitioners.

According to the Discussion Draft of the American Law Institute–American Bar Association Committee on Continuing Professional Responsibility, legal competence is assessed on the basis of several criteria, including: (1) the degree of knowledge of the areas of law in which the lawyer practices; (2) the ability to perform professional techniques proficiently; (3) the capacity to manage work effectively; (4) the ability to identify matters that exceed one's professional competence and to appropriately inform clients thereof; (5) the ability to prepare and complete legal work accurately; and (6) adequate intellectual, emotional, and physical capacity.

Based on the foregoing analysis, lawyers' professional competence may be understood as the ability of lawyers to perform professional tasks and duties related to legal practice in accordance with established professional requirements and standards. Such competence may be evaluated through legal knowledge, the ability to apply such knowledge in practice, professional technical skills, effective and proficient work management and execution, as well as the intellectual, emotional, and physical capacities necessary for the performance of professional responsibilities.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

In academic discourse, ethics is understood as the aggregate of conceptions and viewpoints concerning truth, goodness, beauty, duty, honour, and the principles of conduct derived from such conceptions, which serve to regulate human behaviour and social interaction. These ethical norms are upheld through individual conscience, personal emotions, and the influence of social opinion. Professional ethics, in turn, refers to a set of cognitive and behavioural standards tailored to the specific characteristics of a given profession and promulgated by competent authorities or professional organisations.

Lawyers' professional ethics constitute a specific manifestation of professional ethics. In a broad sense, lawyers' professional ethics encompass the totality of moral standards that society expects lawyers to observe. Under this interpretation, such standards may include ethical expectations that are not formally codified in legal instruments. In a narrower sense, lawyers' professional ethics consist of a structured framework of rules and guidelines governing lawyers' conduct, issued by competent authorities. In this sense, lawyers' professional ethics comprise standards relating primarily to professionalism and integrity.

Professionalism represents a fundamental component of lawyers' professional ethics. This standard requires lawyers to perform their duties diligently, courteously, and in compliance with the law. Lawyers are expected to demonstrate a commitment to serving the best interests of their clients while adhering to the rules and professional standards of the legal profession. Integrity constitutes another essential element of lawyers' professional ethics. Lawyers are expected to act honestly, accurately, and transparently in their dealings with clients and with other relevant parties involved in legal matters. Within the scope of this study, lawyers' professional ethics are approached in the narrow sense, namely as the body of rules and standards that lawyers are required to observe in the course of legal practice. This framework aims to ensure that lawyers perform their professional duties honestly, fairly, and responsibly, while safeguarding clients' legitimate interests within the boundaries of the law and professional ethical standards.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION****Policies on Enhancing Professional Competence and Legal Ethics of Lawyers in Singapore**

Singapore is a small-sized jurisdiction with only three institutions providing formal legal education, the National University of Singapore (NUS), Singapore Management University (SMU), and the School of Law at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS Law), serving a population of approximately six million. Formerly colonised by the British and developed around its strategic potential as a port city, Singapore remains one of the world's most important maritime hubs, located along major trade routes connecting East and West. Since gaining independence in 1965, Singapore has emerged as one of the most open and highly globalised economies worldwide, characterised by a multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-religious, and multinational population.

Singapore is primarily a common law jurisdiction. Although its legal system is autonomous and exhibits certain distinctions from English law, it remains fundamentally rooted in the English legal tradition shared with jurisdictions such as India, Hong Kong, and Australia. At the same time, Singapore also accommodates another legal tradition: Islamic law applies to the Muslim community (accounting for approximately 14.7 per cent of the population) in matters relating to marriage, family relations, inheritance, and certain other areas, such as *waqf* and Islamic trusts.

In addition, Singapore has increasingly been exposed to and influenced by other legal systems. Many of its neighbouring countries and key trading partners, such as Indonesia and China, are civil law jurisdictions that govern commercial relations primarily through codified legal frameworks. The Singapore Government has articulated a strategic objective of developing

Singapore into a regional and global hub for legal services, while simultaneously promoting the city-state as an international arbitration centre. Consequently, the internationalisation of lawyer training and legal human resource development in Singapore is an inevitable outcome of its national development strategy grounded in globalisation and the knowledge-based economy.

## **The Pathway to Becoming a Lawyer in Singapore**

### **1. Foundational Phase (3–4 Years)**

To qualify for legal practice, domestic graduates must complete either a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) programme lasting four to five years or a postgraduate Juris Doctor (JD) programme lasting two to three years at a Singapore law school, and achieve the requisite academic results.

The objectives of the first stage of formal legal education (the foundational phase) include the following:

*First, to establish a solid grounding in core legal subjects.*

*Second, to develop basic functional competencies essential for future professional legal roles.*

*Third, to equip students with essential life skills, including independent learning and critical thinking skills.*

*Fourth, to foster an understanding of Singapore's legal system as well as relevant comparative legal systems.*

To achieve these objectives, the initial stage of legal education continues to prioritise the development of a robust foundation in legal knowledge. In parallel, students are trained in essential legal reasoning skills, such as organisation, analysis, critical evaluation, synthesis, and problem-solving, as well as practice-oriented competencies, including legal research, legal writing, and legal communication. This phase also emphasises the development of students' ability to question, process information, and cultivate "learning-to-learn" capabilities.

Moreover, law students are instructed in the application of legal rules to practical scenarios. The integration of foundational legal knowledge, legal reasoning skills, and interdisciplinary approaches constitutes a critical prerequisite for transforming academic knowledge into effective professional competence upon entry into legal practice.

Each of Singapore's three law schools has developed its own pedagogical identity and curricular orientation, reflecting distinct approaches to fostering students' academic and professional competencies. On average, students spend approximately 2.5 to 3 years completing compulsory core law modules, thereby establishing a foundational body of legal knowledge. These modules typically include Contract Law, Tort Law, Property Law, Criminal Law, Constitutional and Administrative Law, Trusts, Company Law, Evidence, and other foundational subjects required for legal practice in Singapore.

Upon completion of the core curriculum, students generally have an additional 1 to 1.5 years to engage in more diverse academic and practical activities. During this period, students may pursue elective courses outside law, interdisciplinary modules, international exchange programmes, professional internships, or advanced specialised courses aligned with their research or career aspirations.

### **2. Developmental Phase (1.5–2 Years)**

Graduates must pass Part A of the Singapore Bar Examinations ("Part A"). Both domestic graduates and those returning from overseas study are required to pass Part B of the Singapore Bar Examinations ("Part B") and complete a prescribed period of legal training.

Part A was introduced to replace the Diploma in Singapore Law (DipSing). Only graduates from overseas law schools listed under the Legal Profession (Qualified Persons) Rules are required to sit for Part A. This examination focuses on core areas of Singapore law to ensure that foreign-trained graduates possess adequate knowledge of domestic legal foundations prior to entering advanced professional training. Compulsory subjects include civil procedure, criminal procedure, insolvency practice, conveyancing practice, family law practice, ethics and professional responsibility, and professional skills.

Part B is decisive in determining candidates' readiness for legal practice. Conducted on a full-time basis from July to December each year, its primary objective is to "train candidates in the foundational skills of legal practice, provide supervised opportunities for skills application, and focus on the core competencies required of newly qualified lawyers." Candidates must also select two electives from different categories, such as advanced corporate practice, intellectual property, arbitration, maritime law, mediation skills, or cross-border transactions. The Singapore Institute of Legal Education (SILE) strictly prohibits candidates from engaging in employment during Part B to ensure full commitment and training rigour.

SILE serves as the principal regulatory authority overseeing the quality of legal training, including programme accreditation, administration of the bar examinations (Parts A and B), regulation of training institutions, and issuance of guidelines on practice training. This framework ensures that all aspiring lawyers in Singapore are subject to a standardised, measurable, and practice-oriented training regime.

Upon completion of the examinations, candidates must undertake either six months of practice training at a Singapore Law Practice (SLP) or 36 months at designated government agencies before admission as Advocates and Solicitors (AAS). Prior to 2024, the minimum practice training period was six months; however, to enhance professional quality and extend practical exposure, Singapore revised this requirement to one year from 2024 onwards. The number of training contracts available annually, approximately 600 to 650, depends on law firms' recruitment capacity, business prospects, workforce demand, and broader macroeconomic conditions.

### **3. Advanced Phase (Continuing Professional Development – CPD)**

Under the current legal framework administered by SILE, practising lawyers are required to complete a specified number of CPD points annually to renew their practising certificates (PC). In most cases, one CPD point corresponds to one hour of learning. Required CPD points are determined based on post-qualification experience (PQE):

- a. Less than five years' experience: 16 CPD points per year;
- b. Five to fifteen years' experience: 8 CPD points per year;
- c. More than fifteen years' experience: 4 CPD points per year.

These requirements may be fulfilled through accredited CPD activities offered by universities, professional organisations such as the Singapore Academy of Law (SAL) and the Law Society of Singapore, as well as private training providers. Lawyers may also earn CPD points through teaching activities; in such cases, points are awarded at triple the number of teaching hours to reflect preparation and research effort.

Up to half of the annual CPD requirement may be satisfied through flexible activities, including internal firm seminars, non-accredited learning activities (such as IT skills, financial knowledge, office management, and presentation skills), legal publications (with points calculated based on length), and online training videos. Encouraging CPD in areas such as technology, finance, management, and presentation skills further equips lawyers to practise effectively within Singapore's evolving professional context.

The internationalisation of CPD in Singapore is also reflected in the significant participation of global training providers. Alongside domestic institutions, foreign universities, primarily those accredited in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, as well as international professional bodies and private global training providers play an increasingly important role. This diversification enhances training quality, competitiveness, and currency.

Notably, the recognition of teaching, research, and academic publication as CPD activities, coupled with preferential point allocation, demonstrates Singapore's strong emphasis on academic and international legal knowledge as integral to professional competence. These innovative practices underscore Singapore's commitment to expanding professional knowledge networks and skill sets at both domestic and international levels.

## **Professional Integrity as a Cross-Cutting Principle in Lawyers' Development in Singapore**

### **1. Legal Basis of Professional Ethics and Responsibility**

The legal framework governing lawyers' professional ethics and responsibilities in Singapore is primarily established by the Legal Profession Act (LPA) and the Legal Profession (Professional Conduct) Rules (PCR). Unlike jurisdictions that treat professional ethics largely as a matter of self-regulation, Singapore adopts a legalistic approach, positioning professional ethics as an integral component of the legal order, subject to statutory regulation and judicial oversight.

### **2. Core Ethical Duties of Lawyers**

First, the duty to the court and the administration of justice occupies the highest priority. Reflecting English common law tradition, this principle is strictly upheld in Singapore and is articulated in the first four principles of Rule 4.

**Rule 4(a): Paramount Duty to the Court:** Lawyers owe a paramount duty to the court, which takes precedence over their duty to clients. This principle requires lawyers to prioritise justice and the integrity of the judicial system over personal or client interests.

**Rule 4(b): Duty to Clients Within the Limits of Justice:** Lawyers' duties to clients are constrained only by their duty to the court and must be performed in a manner that upholds the standing and integrity of Singapore's legal system and legal profession.

**Rule 4(c): Honesty, Integrity, and Honour:** Lawyers must discharge their responsibilities honourably and with integrity toward courts, tribunals, clients, the public, and fellow members of the profession, thereby reinforcing public confidence and professional standards.

**Rule 4(d): Compliance with Singapore Law:** This rule establishes a fundamental legal boundary for lawyers' conduct, ensuring that professional activities remain lawful, transparent, and credible in both domestic and international contexts.

Second, duties owed to clients include loyalty, diligence, professional competence, and confidentiality. Lawyers must avoid conflicts of interest or fully disclose and manage them where unavoidable. Confidentiality is strongly protected but not absolute, particularly in cases involving fraud, money laundering, or serious threats to public interest.

Third, duties owed to society and the profession require lawyers to maintain professional conduct, preserve the reputation of the legal profession, and contribute to the public good, including legal aid and community service.

**Rule 4(e): Facilitating Access to Justice:** Lawyers bear a broader social responsibility to facilitate public understanding of and access to the legal system through legal advice, legal aid participation, and safeguarding individuals' lawful rights.

**Rule 4(f): Fairness and Courtesy in Professional Conduct**

Lawyers must act fairly and courteously toward colleagues, clients, and all stakeholders. This principle reflects the importance of ethical culture in resolving professional conflicts respectfully and professionally.

**Authorities Governing Lawyers' Professional Ethics in Singapore****1. Law Society of Singapore (LSS)**

The Law Society of Singapore plays a central role in regulating professional ethics among private practitioners. Although constituted as a professional body, LSS exercises regulatory functions delegated under the LPA and the Professional Conduct Rules. Complaints may be lodged by any person under section 85(1) of the LPA. LSS conducts preliminary investigations to determine whether the conduct constitutes inadequate professional service or professional misconduct.

LSS also provides ethical support resources, including the Advisory Committee and the "Ethics Assist Helpline," which offer non-binding guidance on ethical dilemmas in legal practice.

**2. Disciplinary Process: From the Law Society to the Disciplinary Tribunal**

Where prima facie evidence of misconduct exists, LSS refers the matter to a more formal disciplinary mechanism. An Inquiry Panel determines whether a Disciplinary Tribunal should be convened. These tribunals, often comprising retired judges or senior lawyers, conduct quasi-criminal proceedings and may recommend sanctions ranging from warnings and fines to referral for higher adjudication.

**3. Highest Adjudicatory Authority: Court of Three Judges**

In the most serious cases, matters may be referred to the Court of Three Judges of the Singapore Supreme Court, which has authority to impose the most severe sanctions, including suspension, striking off the roll of advocates and solicitors, substantial fines, and other penalties.

**Policies on Enhancing Professional Competence and Legal Ethics of Lawyers in Viet Nam**

In Viet Nam, legal education is provided by numerous institutions. However, Hanoi Law University and Ho Chi Minh City University of Law are designated as core institutions for legal training. Other providers include specialised and non-specialised law programmes. Recent policy directions have clarified institutional roles, restricting non-specialised institutions to basic legal education while concentrating professional law training within specialised law schools.

Socio-economic conditions and legal tradition shape Viet Nam's lawyer training policies. As a rapidly developing and globally integrating economy with over 97 million people, Viet Nam requires a highly competent legal profession capable of meeting sophisticated domestic and international demand. Moreover, integration necessitates lawyers proficient in both domestic and international law and capable of cross-border professional engagement.

Rooted in a civil law tradition influenced by France and socialist legal systems, Viet Nam is increasingly exposed to common law principles and international legal norms. The establishment of specialised courts within international financial centres exemplifies this shift. Similar to Singapore, the internationalisation of lawyer training in Viet Nam is an inevitable trend aligned with aspirations to become a prominent international legal hub.

**CONCLUSION**

Enhancing lawyers' professional competence and legal ethics is an inevitable trend to meet the growing demand for high-quality legal services in the context of deep international integration. Although Vietnam's current system of lawyer training has made certain progress, it still suffers from significant limitations, particularly the insufficient integration of theory and practice, as well as the incomplete development of core professional ethical values. The study of Singapore's experience in building a comprehensive lawyer training system that integrates professional expertise with legal ethics offers valuable lessons for Vietnam. To improve the quality of the legal profession, Vietnam needs to adopt a renewed approach to legal education, with a stronger focus on developing practical professional skills and applied legal ethics, while also strengthening supervised practice-oriented training and furthering the system of continuing professional development for lawyers.

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