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9-in-10 law grads now landing practice contracts despite labour mismatch elsewhere

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WongPartnership's Ng Wai King (left) says: "We are always keen to welcome the best young legal minds to the firm and to that end, we have actually hired more practice trainees this year compared to last." Dentons Rodyk & Davidson's Loh Kia Meng (centre) has observed that there is generally a greater demand for practice trainees now. The Law Society of Singapore's Gregory Vijayendran (right) thinks that there is now a largely dynamic equilibrium in terms of supply and demand. PHOTOS: WONGPARTNERSHIP, DENTONS RODYK & DAVIDSON, THE LAW SOCIETY OF SINGAPORE

Singapore

WHILE segments of the labour market are reporting mismatch in demand and supply, it appears that the legal sector is close to some form of equilibrium, at least at the training stage.

There are still more trainees chasing practice opportunities at law firms, but the imbalance has improved to only 1 in 10 not landing a training contract, compared to as many as a quarter without the Bar admission ticket in 2014.

Statistics from the Ministry of Law showed that the number of law graduates taking up practice training contracts has been consistent, at around 600 to 680 each year between 2016 and 2020.

A spokesperson for the ministry noted: "This is about 9 in 10 law graduates, which is an improvement from 2014, when we estimated that there were about 490 practice training contracts for nearly 650 graduates."

Service of a practice training period is a requirement for entry to the Singapore Bar.

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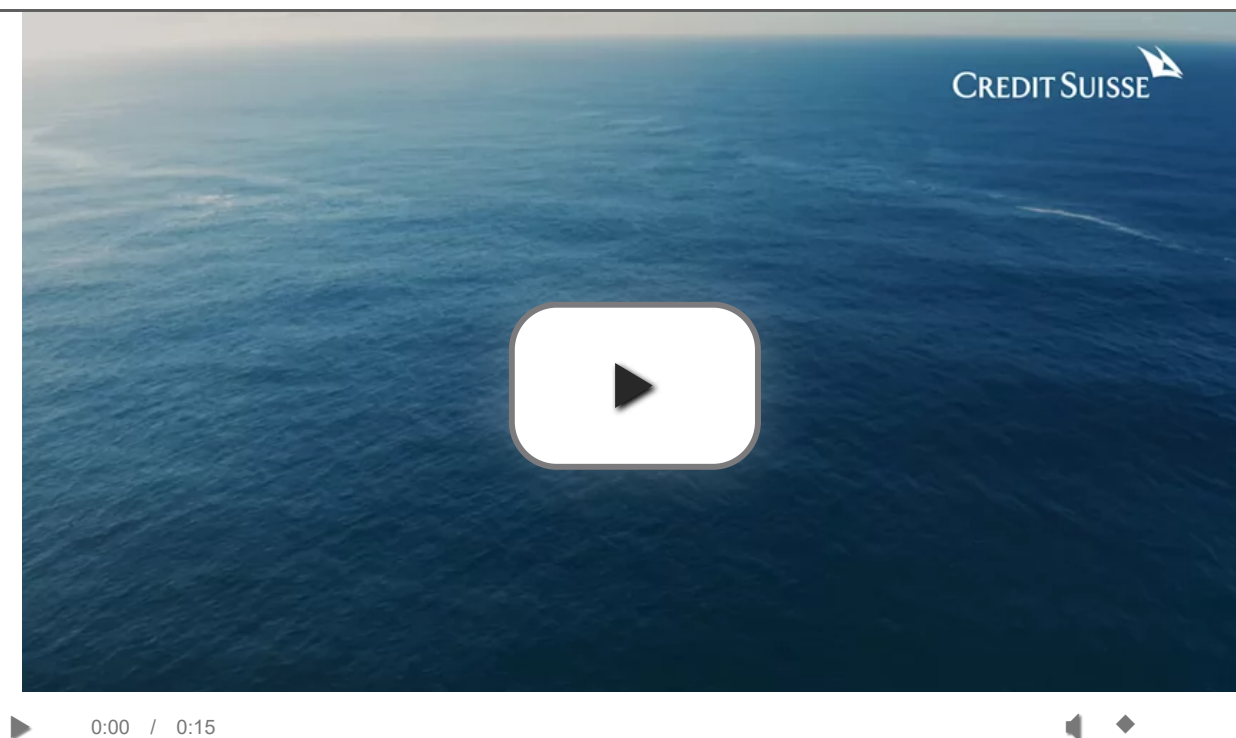
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President of the Law Society of Singapore, Gregory Vijayendran, thinks that there is now a largely dynamic equilibrium in terms of supply and demand. The Senior Counsel said: "There appears to be a market correction since the government's announcement of a few years ago."

Back in 2015, the law ministry had drastically cut the number of British universities approved for graduate admission to the Singapore Bar. This was in a bid to ensure quality legal talent, with intakes from 2016 onwards affected by the change. The number of Singaporean law students in the UK had surged from 350 in 2008 to 1,142 in 2013. Competition for the 6-month practice training contract at law firms turned stiffer, as the overseas graduates compete with those from the local law schools as well.

WongPartnership, one of the Big Four law firms in Singapore, has increased the number of training contracts offered over the years, with over 40 trainees taken on board each year. The firm's managing partner Ng Wai King told The Business Times: "We are always keen to welcome the best young legal minds to the firm and to that end, we have actually hired more practice trainees this year compared to last.

"This continues a general trend over the past few years where we have taken on an increasing number of trainees. This ensures a vibrant talent pool in the firm and also allows us to do our part in nurturing the next generation of lawyers."

Another one of the Big Four, Drew & Napier, stated that the firm has been expanding its intake of trainees as it continues to grow in Singapore and into the region through Drew Network Asia. Its director Foo Yuet Min stated: "We are taking in significantly more trainees and we always have space for good trainees. A significant number of our trainees come from our internship programme, which we are very proud of.

"The time spent together during the internship usually gives both sides a good platform to get to know each other, which usually contributes towards ensuring a good fit when it comes to a career with us. We therefore made great efforts to continue with our internship programme, albeit virtually, throughout the pandemic."

But she stopped short of furnishing the trainee numbers Drew plans to hire.

Loh Kia Meng, Dentons Rodyk & Davidson senior partner and chief operating officer, has observed that there is generally a greater demand for practice trainees now. Dentons has not decided on its trainee headcount for this year.

Loh pointed out that the numbers from the Law Society continue to show a hollowing-out of mid-career lawyers with between 5 and 15 years of practice, as this group of 1,690 was the smallest compared to 2,214 practitioners with under 5 years of experience and 2,429 counsel who have practised for over 15 years.

He also sees more young lawyers becoming in-house counsel or pursuing opportunities outside of private legal practice, when these lawyers and practice trainees are needed to fill the gap left by the departure of mid-career lawyers.

Another Big Four, Rajah & Tann, however, has not seen a sharp increase in demand for practice trainees, and it has consistently been offering an average of about 40 to 50 training contracts per year.

Lee Shulin, co-founder of Ansa Search, pointed out that there has not been a corresponding increase in practice training contract positions with law firms despite the number of law graduates more than doubled with more universities offering legal education.

Formerly practising with a Big Four, Lee said: "While the situation has improved slightly with law firms now experiencing a severe shortage of talent, it's still a lot more competitive for law school graduates to land that highly coveted training contract with a top tier local law firm."

While the market correction has cut the oversupply of trainees, there are still a small number of law graduates without the training contract and thereby fail to have their names on the roll of advocates and solicitors.

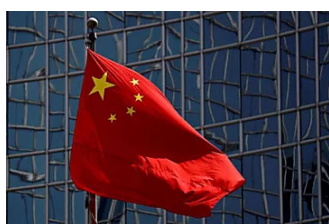
"We can do more, because you know we don't want to have someone who's invested 4 years of their life... end up... kind of not using that skill set, for which many people in society would benefit, many people would receive the niche expertise that is found in a legally qualified person..." said the Law Society's Vijayendran.

To incentivise law firms to furnish practice training contracts, the Law Society last year put up guidelines on charging out for trainees' services to mitigate the hiring firms' costs.

Vijayendran said charging out recognises the trainee's contributions and value as well. He reiterated, however, the firms' clients must be informed about the billing, and the fundamental nature of training must not be diluted.

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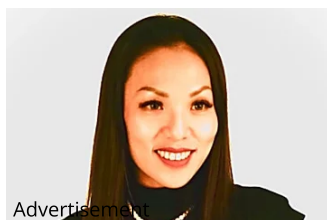
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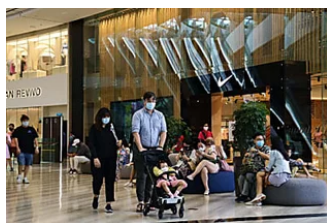
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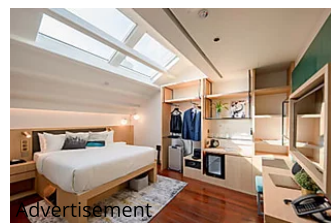
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