The legal profession and foreign law firms

Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland and Germany),
Solicitor (England & Wales and Hong Kong)
Of Counsel, KGP Legal LLC
alexander.ressos@kgplegal.com.sg
www.ressos.com.sg

A fused profession

Singapore lawyers belong to a fused profession. Every advocate and solicitor admitted by the Supreme Court may both appear in court and advise clients in transactions, a feature inherited from the Straits Settlements that Chapter I of Part B described.[1] The Law Society of Singapore was formed in 1967 and represents all lawyers practising Singapore law. It also handles complaints, which pass through review and inquiry committees and can end in proceedings before a Court of Three Judges.[2] The Singapore Academy of Law, established by statute with effect from 1 November 1988, appoints Senior Counsel, notaries public and commissioners for oaths and acts as the development and promotion agency of the legal sector.[3]

The profession has grown with the financial centre. It counted about 4,000 practising lawyers in 2002 and 6,512 in 2023, of whom 3,677 were men and 2,835 women.[4] The growth of more than 60 % in two decades coincided with the expansion of corporate, banking and dispute resolution work. Concern about the

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

attractiveness of litigation and general practice to young lawyers recurs in the speeches of the Law Society and the judiciary, a question that Chapter IV of this part takes up in the context of the financial workforce.

Legal education

For about half a century, Singapore had a single law school. Legal education began in 1956 with the Department of Law of the University of Malaya, which became a faculty in 1959 under its founding dean Lionel Astor Sheridan. Its first graduates completed their studies in 1961 and included Chan Sek Keong, who later became Chief Justice, as well as the diplomat Tommy Koh. The faculty continued in the University of Singapore after 1962 and became part of the National University of Singapore in 1980. A second law school was established at the Singapore Management University in 2007. A third followed at the Singapore University of Social Sciences in 2017.[5]

The two later schools widened the supply of locally trained lawyers at a time when corporate and financial work was absorbing a growing share of each cohort. Graduates of approved foreign universities can also qualify in Singapore after completing local requirements administered by the Singapore Institute of Legal Education.[6] The result is a profession that combines locally trained lawyers with lawyers educated in London, Oxford, Cambridge, Melbourne or New York, which suits a centre whose clients come from many legal systems.

Opening the market to foreign law firms

Foreign law firms were long confined to advising on the law of their home jurisdictions and on international transactions. By 2000 Singapore counted 576 foreign lawyers. By July 2009 it had 95 foreign law firms with 840 foreign lawyers.[7] The question that occupied the government was whether foreign firms should be allowed to practise Singapore law, which had been reserved to Singapore law practices.

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

The answer came in 2008, after the Committee to Develop the Legal Sector, chaired by Justice V K Rajah, had recommended a measured opening.[8] The Ministry of Law created the Qualifying Foreign Law Practice scheme. On 5 December 2008 it announced the award of the first licences to Allen & Overy, Clifford Chance, Herbert Smith, Latham & Watkins, Norton Rose and White & Case, chosen from 20 proposals. The selection criteria included the offshore work that the Singapore office would generate, the number of lawyers based in Singapore, the practice areas offered and the office's role as a regional headquarters.[9]

A QFLP licence allows a foreign firm to practise Singapore law through Singapore-qualified lawyers who hold practising certificates, or through foreign lawyers holding foreign practitioner certificates. Domestic litigation and general practice remain excluded, including criminal law, retail conveyancing, family law and administrative law.[10] The scheme was designed alongside the Joint Law Venture, which allows a foreign firm and a Singapore law practice to combine under a common structure while remaining separate firms.[11] A further form, the Formal Law Alliance, permits closer cooperation between a foreign and a Singapore firm without a joint venture.[12]

The economic weight of the licensed firms

The licences have been renewed in successive rounds, with changes in the list of holders. When the Ministry of Law renewed nine licences at the end of 2020, it reported that the QFLP firms had generated more than S$3.07 billion in offshore revenue since 2013 and employed about 190 Singapore-qualified lawyers in their Singapore offices.[13]

In October 2025 the nine firms holding licences were Allen Overy Shearman Sterling, Clifford Chance, Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, Latham & Watkins, Jones Day, Linklaters, Norton Rose Fulbright, Sidley Austin and White & Case. The ministry's update of 16 October 2025 stated that the nine firms had generated more than S$2 billion in revenue from offshore work between 2021 and 2024 and employed more than 550 lawyers in Singapore, over 40 % of whom were Singapore-qualified.[14] The emphasis on offshore revenue reveals the purpose of the scheme. Singapore

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

admitted foreign firms to Singapore law practice in exchange for work that would otherwise be done in London, Hong Kong or New York. It kept domestic practice for local firms, so that the opening served the export of legal services without displacing the domestic profession.

Beyond the licensed firms, the population of foreign practices has kept growing. A report in the *Singapore Law Gazette* stated that 141 foreign law practices were operating in Singapore in January 2026, up from 74 in 2020, and that 1,418 foreign lawyers were registered with the Legal Services Regulatory Authority, or 18.15 % of all registered lawyers.[15]

The review of 2025

The licensing structure, with its separate categories for foreign law practices, QFLPs, Joint Law Ventures and Formal Law Alliances, has become complicated. In October 2025 a review of the regulatory framework for law practices recommended changes to the QFLP framework. The Ministry of Law announced that it would study the recommendations, consult the public and publish its response later. It allowed the existing licences to be renewed for two years, from 1 January 2026 to 31 December 2027, and stated that the outcome of the next formal renewal exercise would be announced in 2027.[16] Press reports described the aims of the review as a simpler licensing framework and stronger safeguards for the independence of Singapore law practices that collaborate with foreign firms.[17]

Notes

1. Wikipedia, “Lawyers in Singapore” (accessed November 2026): lawyers in Singapore are part of a fused profession and may act as both solicitor and advocate. ↩
2. Wikipedia, “Law Society of Singapore” (accessed November 2026): formed in 1967; complaints proceed through a Review Committee, an Inquiry Committee and a Disciplinary Committee, after which the Society may apply to the Court of Three Judges for censure, fine, suspension or striking off. ↩

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

3. Wikipedia, “Singapore Academy of Law” (accessed November 2026): created by the Singapore Academy of Law Act, effective 1 November 1988; functions include appointing Senior Counsel, Commissioners for Oaths and Notaries Public and the “International Promotion of Singapore Law”. ↩
4. Wikipedia, “Lawyers in Singapore” (accessed November 2026): the number of practising lawyers rose from 4,000 in 2002 to 6,512 in 2023, with 3,677 male and 2,835 female lawyers in 2023. ↩
5. Wikipedia, “NUS Faculty of Law” (accessed November 2026): founded in 1956 as the Department of Law of the University of Malaya; a faculty from 1959; founding dean Lionel Astor Sheridan (1956–1962); first graduates in 1961, including Chan Sek Keong and Tommy Koh; NUS Law was Singapore’s only law school until the SMU School of Law was established in 2007; the SUSS School of Law followed in 2017. ↩
6. Singapore Institute of Legal Education, admission requirements for “qualified persons” holding degrees from approved overseas universities. ↩
7. Wikipedia, “Lawyers in Singapore” (accessed November 2026): in July 2009 there were 95 foreign firms and 840 foreign lawyers, up from 576 in 2000; six international firms were licensed to practise local corporate law in December 2008. ↩
8. Ministry of Law, “Update on Qualifying Foreign Law Practice Licences”, 16 October 2025 (mlaw.gov.sg, accessed November 2026): the QFLP scheme was introduced in 2008 following recommendations by the Committee to Develop the Legal Sector, chaired by then Justice V K Rajah. ↩
9. Ministry of Law, “Award of Qualifying Foreign Law Practice licences”, press release of 5 December 2008, mlaw.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): licences to Allen & Overy, Clifford Chance, Herbert Smith, Latham & Watkins, Norton Rose and White & Case; 20 proposals received by the closing date of 9 October 2008; licences initially valid for five years; selection criteria included offshore work, number of Singapore-based lawyers, practice areas, regional headquarters role and global and Singapore track record. ↩

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

10. Ministry of Law, "Update on Qualifying Foreign Law Practice Licences", 16 October 2025, mlaw.gov.sg (accessed November 2026): a QFLP may practise Singapore law "except in domestic areas of litigation and general practice", such as criminal law, retail conveyancing, family law and administrative law, through Singapore-qualified lawyers with practising certificates or foreign lawyers with foreign practitioner certificates. ↩
11. Ministry of Law, press release of 5 December 2008 (mlaw.gov.sg, accessed November 2026): the QFLP scheme complements the liberalisation of international arbitration and the Joint Law Venture scheme. ↩
12. Formal Law Alliance as a licence category under the Legal Profession Act 1966 and the Legal Profession (Law Practice Entities) Rules. ↩
13. Ministry of Law, press release of December 2020 on the renewal of nine QFLP licences, as reported in "Singapore renews 9 foreign firms' local licences", *Legally India*, 31 December 2020 (accessed November 2026): S$3.07 billion in offshore revenue since the 2013 round; 190 Singapore-qualified lawyers employed in the nine firms' Singapore offices; licences renewed for five years. ↩
14. Ministry of Law, "Update on Qualifying Foreign Law Practice Licences", 16 October 2025 (mlaw.gov.sg, accessed November 2026): list of the nine QFLP firms; over $2 billion in revenue from offshore work from 2021 to 2024; over 550 lawyers in Singapore, more than 40 % Singapore-qualified. ↩
15. *Singapore Law Gazette*, report on the legal profession citing Legal Services Regulatory Authority data as of January 2026: 141 foreign law practices (74 in 2020); 1,418 registered foreign lawyers (18.15 % of registered lawyers). ↩
16. Ministry of Law, "Update on Qualifying Foreign Law Practice Licences", 16 October 2025 (mlaw.gov.sg, accessed November 2026): licences last renewed at the end of 2020 for five years; renewable for two years from 1 January 2026 to 31 December 2027; a review recommended changes to the QFLP framework, on which the ministry would consult; the outcome of the next renewal exercise to be announced in 2027. ↩

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. General information only, not legal, tax or investment advice. No client relationship is created. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. More information at SingaporeIQ.com and ressos.com.sg.

17. “Review under way to simplify Singapore’s foreign law firm licensing framework, strengthen local practice independence”, *The Business Times*, 17 October 2025, reproduced on Singapore Law Watch. ↩

Disclaimer

This article is provided for general information only. It is based on publicly available sources as at its date of publication. These sources have not been independently verified against licences, regulatory registers or the records of the entities concerned. It is not legal, tax, financial or investment advice. Nor is it a recommendation to invest in, transact with or use the services of any entity mentioned. Law and regulation change frequently, so the content may be incomplete or outdated. To the fullest extent permitted by law, Dr Alexander Ressos and the publisher of SingaporeIQ exclude all liability for loss or damage arising from the use of or reliance on this article. Readers should obtain advice on their specific circumstances before acting or refraining from action.

Names and trademarks of the entities discussed belong to their owners and are used for identification only. Their mention implies no endorsement, affiliation or allegation of wrongdoing. All Singapore law advice is provided by a duly licensed and regulated firm of Singapore advocates and solicitors only on the basis of an express written letter of engagement. Corrections and updates: contact@ressos.com.

© 2026 Dr Alexander Ressos. This article may be quoted with attribution to SingaporeIQ (SingaporeIQ.com). Reproduction in full and any commercial use require prior written consent. The Legal Terms at https://singaporeiq.com/legal-terms apply.

Author contact: Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP · contact@ressos.com