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Mr Alexander Joseph Woon is used to people bringing up his father in conversations and calls it a “pleasant experience”.

“People would come up and say, ‘Oh, he taught me when I was in law school’,” the 30-year-old said.

His father, Mr Walter Woon, was Singapore’s Attorney-General from 2008 to 2010. Now a professor at the National University of Singapore’s Faculty of Law and dean of the Singapore Institute of Legal Education, he continues to be a prominent figure in the legal profession.

Mr Walter Woon has also been in the news lately because he is acting for Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s sister-in-law Lee Suet Fern, whose case of possible professional misconduct in preparing the last will of founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew is heard by a legal disciplinary tribunal.

If these were big shoes to fill, Mr Alexander Woon is not giving anything away, for he said that he was never made to feel like he was living in his father’s shadows.

“He’s always been a very chill, hands-off kind of person. It’s not like he has expectations or that he encouraged us to go down any particular path.”

Even in the four years he served as deputy public prosecutor for the Attorney-General’s Chambers, Mr Alexander Woon was never made to feel as if he had to live up to any expectations. “It’s always the case of just doing your job,” he said.

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The lawyer was among 532 being called to the Singapore Bar on Tuesday and Wednesday, and joins his other family members who are or have been in the same profession.

His mother, Mrs Janis Woon, is a retired deputy registrar at the Family Court, while his twin brother Adrian and his wife are both lawyers.

It is double the joy this year for the younger Mr Woon as well, having just become father to a newborn daughter five months ago.

Over the years, the lawyer said that his father had imparted some wisdom and experience to him, reminding him, for example, that litigation lawyers are not in the courts to win, but to arrive at a just result.

His parents have never made any presumptions that he would pursue law.

Mr Alexander Woon said that his father specialised in company law, but he himself had always been interested in criminal law and won the President's Scholarship in 2009 to read law at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom — the alma mater of his parents.

Today, he is a senior assistant director at the Supreme Court's transformation and innovation office, where he works on new approaches to improve the judiciary's work, such as a recently launched online portal to verify court documents that cuts down on paperwork and several days of waiting time.

Unlike most of the newly admitted lawyers who are fresh graduates, legal service officers such as himself are not required to be called to the Bar before practising.

"It's more of a rite of passage," he explained. "It is a milestone in your professional development and on the pragmatic level, it does give you options so that if, one day, you want to leave public service and do private sector work, at least you have the option."

He said that he had taken the final "Part B" of the Bar examinations years ago, but public officers take a longer time to be formally admitted as lawyers.

At the ceremony on Tuesday morning, Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon called on the new lawyers to embrace technology to close the gaps in access to justice in Singapore.

That is among the responsibilities of Mr Alexander Woon's office set up just a year ago.

It is now partnering the Singapore Management University to study the possibility of setting up a virtual legal clinic to provide legal help to anyone with internet access.

The courts can sometimes be seen as archaic, with certain administrative processes that are seemingly from a bygone era. The office aims to bring these processes up to speed in the digital age, Mr Alexander Woon said.

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NATIONAL SPRINTER IN ROBES

In December 2019, SMU fresh graduate and national athlete Tan Zong Yang arrived at the exam hall to take the last of eight papers for the “Part B” Bar exams, decked in his Team Singapore attire with luggage in tow.

His track-and-field teammates had flown to the Philippines a day earlier to take part in the 30th Southeast Asian (SEA) Games, but he had one more paper to clear.

As it turned out, Mr Tan placed sixth in the 400m race, passed his exams and will be called to the Bar on Wednesday.

The 26-year-old recalled: “It was very hectic... After every paper, I have to still go for training in the afternoon and try and get some rest before the next paper.”

He credits his achievements to having lots of discipline. “But more than that, I have a very good support system in my training group, my family and my classmates during my coursework. They were very willing to help me.”

Throughout this time, his batchmate and fellow SEA Games sprinter Timothee Yap — who will also be called to the Bar — was his constant companion through training and studying for the exams.

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The new lawyers are graduating at a time when the economic downturn caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has severely jeopardised employment prospects, with 19 per cent of the cohort of new lawyers still looking for work.

Mr Tan, however, was glad he managed to secure a job at a commercial litigation firm.

And as the pandemic continues ravaging the economy, potentially leaving the lower-income group with less access to legal advice, Mr Tan hopes to engage in pro bono work in the future.

“As a national athlete, the nation has provided me with a lot of (support) and I think this would be my way of giving back.”