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Subject: (Embargoed) Speech by Dr Lee Boon Yang, 20 Aug 1999, 3.30 pm

Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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ADDRESS BY DR LEE BOON YANG, MINISTER FOR MANPOWER, AT THE SPECIAL ACADEMIC AWARDS  
PRESENTATION CEREMONY 1999 HELD ON FRI, 20 AUG 99 AT 1530 HOURS AT THE REGIONAL  
LANGUAGE CENTRE AUDITORIUM, 30 ORANGE GROVE ROAD

**National Archives of Singapore**  
Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Boys and girls

I am pleased to be here this afternoon to present the 1999 Prime Minister's  
Book Prize for excellence in bilingualism and the Lee Kuan Yew Award for excellence  
in Mathematics and Science.

These prestigious awards give well-deserved recognition to students for  
their achievements. These awards also underscore our key educational objective of  
grooming young Singaporeans for their future roles in society. Education prepares  
our young citizens for their role in nation-building. Looking ahead, whether

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Singapore survives and prospers will depend, first, on our ability to rise above economic competition in a globalize environment, and second, on achieving a strong sense of social cohesion and rootedness among our people. Education will play a major part in answering these twin challenges. Through education, young Singaporeans will acquire the skills, mind-set and values to be adaptable, productive and value-added contributors to economic growth. At the same time, education will result in forging strong bonds with our nation and fellow citizens.

One of the key objectives of the mother tongue programme is to strengthen the bonds among our people. The mother tongue languages serve as a powerful means of inculcating core values and attitudes that are part of Singapore's rich cultural heritage. These values will help our students to gain a stronger sense of identity, pride and self-respect as Singaporeans. A good command of our mother tongue languages will also strengthen our young citizens' emotional attachment and rootedness to Singapore.

Our bilingualism policy has another benefit. Numerous research studies in the past 30 years have concluded that fluent bilingualism contributes to the cognitive growth of children. Researchers believe that knowing two languages and perspectives gives bilingual children greater mental flexibility and increases their ability in concept formation. These qualities will contribute to a more nimble and capable human resource pool.

Although the bilingual policy has increased the burden on our students, I believe that it is a burden that we must gladly bear. While English will remain a vital and extensive language for economic life, our mother tongue will provide the cultural ballast to retain our uniqueness and social bonds. Without our mother tongues, we run the risk of sailing in a ship without an anchor. We will end up at the mercy of the rise and fall of global trends and unable to capitalise on our own values and tradition to seek out opportunities for sustainable growth over the longer-term.

Besides languages, excellence in mathematics and science is critical to power our efforts to transform our economy into a knowledge-based economy. A KBE is one in which human and intellectual capital becomes the main factor of success. The ability of our people to absorb process, create and apply knowledge will be the key to maintaining our competitive advantage. In a KBE, we move from basic manufacturing work into higher value-added technology intensive undertakings, including research and development. Hence, we will need more scientists and engineers to keep us on the cutting edge of scientific and technological progress.

To nurture young Singaporeans and enhance your capabilities, the Ministry of Education had unveiled an action plan called "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation". The plan aims to provide our students with a world-class education and set clear standards for the outcome of our educational efforts. It entails nurturing creative, independent thinking, and incorporating extensive use of information technology in schools. Students will not be just taught facts but equipped with the intellectual skills to recognise, analyse and evolve solutions to different issues and problems. They will be fully prepared to participate in the knowledge-based economy as future generations of knowledge workers.

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As Singapore moves towards a knowledge economy, we strive towards things not only made in Singapore, but made by Singapore. In other words, we must increasingly be much more involved in the product research and development phase. We cannot compete just by serving as a low cost manufacturing base. Our competitors, such as neighbouring countries, with their much larger workforce, will be more efficient in such basic economic activities. We need to actively engage in research and development activities and apply creative thinking to exploit and utilize the latest technology. We must move up the value-added ladder. Hence, we like to encourage more students to take up the challenges of R&D work. By becoming research scientists or engineers, you can provide the key thrust and directions for future economic growth. The State of California, USA, has become the world's 5th largest economy. It has grown to this level by capitalizing on a large pool of top talents in the computer and IT industry. The thousands of software and hardware experts in Silicon Valley are continuously churning out new ideas and products. Not all but many do hit the jackpot to result in real growth and benefits to the economy. I would therefore encourage students with a flair for mathematics and science to spare no effort to nurture these talents. In due course, you should channel your innovative and creative energy into value-adding R&D activities. You have the potential to make enormous contributions to our KBE.

In conclusion, I congratulate this year's two groups of Special Academic Award winners - those who have achieved effective bilingualism at the various critical levels and those who have excelled in mathematics and science. I hope that you will continue to develop your capabilities, be it in languages, mathematics or science, and in time to come, rise to the forefront in our effort to forge a successful and competitive world-class economy. Thank you.

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