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Speech by Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Education and Second Minister for Defence, at the Official Opening of the Council for Private Education (CPE) Student Services Centre, on Thursday, 22 April 2010, at 3:30pm, at the Auditorium, YMCA Singapore Building

Your Excellencies

Mr Lin Cheng Ton

Chairman of the Council for Private Education Board

Mrs Tan Ching Yee

Permanent Secretary (Education)

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon,

1. I am pleased to be here this afternoon to mark the official opening of the Council for Private Education's Student Services Centre. I am heartened to see the many stakeholder groups from the private education sector present here today. Leading private providers recognise that the most crucial factor to ensure the long term status of Singapore as an education hub is an untarnished reputation. It takes continuing effort to win the trust and confidence of students and parents. Therefore, it is in your interest that the Council for Private Education, or the CPE, fulfils its mission. Today's official opening is indeed a meaningful milestone for CPE in its 5-month existence and signifies the CPE's commitment to provide students with the necessary information to know what to expect from providers, their rights and responsibilities, as well as avenues for recourse.

2. The Private Education Act passed in Parliament last September established the CPE as the regulator for private education institutions (PEIs). But beyond this, it signalled that the "light-touch" regulatory regime was no longer a suitable approach as the sector had grown many fold in recent years. Established providers had

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invested enormous resources and needed a more robust framework to ensure that their efforts in building up their reputation, as well as that of Singapore's, would not be broken down by errant PEIs. Even though these incidents may be few and involve small PEIs, such closures due to poor academic standards and governance have a large detrimental impact on the entire system. As a result, all and especially those who have kept up standards suffer.

3. This was the reason why a mandatory Enhanced Registration Framework was effected which stipulates a set of more stringent criteria in the key areas of corporate and academic governance; student protection measures; and information disclosure which the PEIs must meet in order to register and operate their businesses. Complementing the mandatory Enhanced Registration Framework is the EduTrust Certification Scheme which serves as a benchmark of higher quality. PEIs can apply to be certified, if they can satisfy certain academic, financial and student welfare requirements. This serves as a useful incentive to upgrade the entire sector.

4. However, new courses and their corresponding certification are offered very frequently and officers with the CPE cannot be everywhere or know the operations of each provider intimately all the time. Further, while laws and enforcements are necessary to ensure high standards, this must be balanced, as too tight a regime will stifle the ability of the sector to respond to genuine educational needs of students. The regulatory framework can be greatly enhanced by greater discernment and sophistication on the part of consumers who will in turn spur the industry towards greater compliance and better quality of service.

THE CPE'S ROLE IN CONSUMER EDUCATION

5. The Singapore brand of efficiency and trustworthiness has great value and has drawn a large number of new students into the PE sector, including many international students. However, this can be abused by errant providers who capitalise on the fact that students, both local or international, trust this brand-name implicitly, and as a result do not exercise care and due diligence to check out the quality and authenticity of providers or their courses. To address this, the CPE intends to increase consumer awareness through public education programmes, to

help potential students be more discerning about the various educational options available and to make informed choices.

6. The Student Services Centre (SSC) launched today will serve as the CPE's primary interface with students and the public and will be the key vehicle in driving the various consumer education initiatives. The SSC will play a central role in the CPE's plans to step up efforts in consumer education and student support which will be along three strategic thrusts.

Building Strong Consumer Sophistication

7. Firstly, the CPE will require PEIs to make available and accessible accurate and relevant information to help consumers make informed choices. With mandatory requirements under the new regulatory regime, PEIs must disclose key information concerning their courses, teaching staff, student enrolment, fee structure, facilities and other business operations on their information collaterals, enrolment documents and website. PEIs are also required to ensure that prospective students are fully apprised of the contents of the student agreements prior to signing. In addition, PEIs have to adhere to CPE-prescribed guidelines on advertisements, to ensure that they do not misrepresent themselves or the courses they offer.

8. While the PE Act mandates the disclosure of accurate information, the visibility and accessibility of the various information channels and platforms used by the CPE will be instrumental in ensuring that students receive it. In this regard, the SSC hopes to be the "first-stop" for all prospective students. An array of brochures, student handbooks and relevant checklists will be made available. The SSC will also run outreach programmes, awareness campaigns and advisory talks to guide prospective students in making more discerning choices about studying opportunities in Singapore's private education sector.

9. This information will also be provided online and, wherever possible, in the languages of key source countries of international students. In addition, the SSC will be leveraging on online youth-centric and new media networking platforms to build up the visibility and profile of the CPE and reach out to a wider audience.

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These are relatively inexpensive media to reach out to the student community out there and are useful conduits for feedback and subsequent outreach.

Providing Support to Students

10. Secondly, through the SSC, CPE will provide student support services to students. The SSC will handle enquiries and complaints from students. For more serious complaint cases, the SSC will help alert the relevant parties for follow-up actions, including enforcement interventions when regulatory contraventions are involved. In the unfortunate event of PEI closures, the SSC will also play an integral role in providing support for the affected students by managing their queries and ensuring that they are kept up-dated on the processes of their fee refunds and/or course transfer schedules.

11. In instances where the disputes between students and PEIs are contractual in nature, the SSC will also be the referral agency, to take the dispute to the right mechanism for resolution. In this respect, I am very pleased to note that the CPE has been working with the Singapore Mediation Centre (SMC) and the Singapore Institute of Arbitrators (SIArb), to come together to establish a new CPE Mediation-Arbitration Scheme. The three bodies have, within a relatively short time, worked closely to set up a structured and cost-effective dispute resolution mechanism to cater to the needs of students and PEIs. I am confident that this partnership will yield benefits for the students in need of dispute assistance and contribute to a more effective and amenable resolution between affected parties.

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Develop Partnerships with Agencies

12. The third thrust of the Centre is to develop a strong network of partnerships with relevant local and overseas agencies, as well as the media, in carrying out its public education initiatives. The CPE's role in providing timely and relevant information extends not just to students already studying here in our private schools, but also prospective students, both local and overseas. Other than harnessing the web, CPE's SSC will also work with partner agencies such as the Singapore Tourism Board, Economic Development Board, IE Singapore, MFA's overseas missions and the Consumer Association of Singapore (CASE), in

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reaching out to prospective international students by leveraging on these agencies' existing resources and networks here and abroad.

DEVELOPING THE PRIVATE EDUCATION SECTOR

13. Beyond the immediate concerns of helping PEIs prepare for the requirements of the Enhanced Registration Framework and EduTrust Certification Scheme, the CPE will step up its role of developing the private education industry to uplift the overall quality.

14. The CPE cannot do this alone and will be embarking on an extensive exercise in the coming months to formulate an industry development roadmap together with private providers for the PE sector, spanning the next 5 years. The CPE will reach out to PEIs, industry bodies, students, parents and relevant government agencies, to seek views and proposals on various issues and challenges facing the PE industry today. The CPE will also set up a number of working groups with industry representations to review the current landscape, analyse gaps and issues, and formulate strategies to bring us forward.

15. I would like to urge all players in the local PE industry to get involved in and contribute in whatever ways you can in the CPE's engagement exercise for the 5-year Private Education Industry Development Roadmap. Your valued participation and contributions will definitely go a long way in helping the local PE sector establish itself as a trusted and well regarded education hub for the region.

CONCLUSION

16. In conclusion, I would like to congratulate the CPE on the official opening of its Student Services Centre. I look forward to the SSC becoming a one-stop, first - stop centre for all prospective students to ensure that they get a valued education in our private education sector.

17. Thank you.