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**OPENING REMARKS BY DR NG ENG HEN, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION
AND SECOND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE, AT THE CLOSING CEREMONY
OF THE POLYTECHNIC FORUM 2010 ON FRIDAY 8 OCTOBER 2010,
8:00 PM, AT Ngee ANN CONVENTION CENTRE**

Principals,

Members of the Organising Committee,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good evening.

Introduction

1. It is my pleasure to be here at the Polytechnic Forum 2010 Closing Ceremony. This is the 14th Polytechnic Forum and as originally conceived, serves as a useful platform for polytechnic students to discuss current and national issues. I laud your efforts for continuing this Forum.

Theme: “Our Singapore, 2030”

2. I like the theme for this year’s Polytechnic Forum - “Our Singapore, 2030”. Each word has significant meaning. The theme starts with an affirmation of ownership – our. This is a fundamental starting point, and the correct one. Each of us has a stake in this country’s future, but where Singapore is headed depends on our decisions, collectively. We are in the same boat, whether we like it or not. “Singapore” defines our nation and after 45 years of independence, we can objectively conclude that the country does have a unique identity – its people, its food, customs, even culture. When we travel, we can recognise Singaporeans almost instantly, by the way they dress, behave and speak. Our students congregate together when they study overseas, drawn together by perhaps food or common interests. “2030” poses questions. What will Singapore be? Where do we want to take

it?
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3. There are therefore many important issues that this three worded theme asks, but I would like to confine my remarks to Polytechnic education. During the dialogue session we can explore further on other national themes.

4. By 2030, will Polytechnic education gain or lose value as a tertiary education model? After all, we are among the very few countries that have kept the Polytechnic sector. Countries such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Hong Kong have either amalgamated their polytechnics with specific universities or converted them to full universities. Many academics I meet from these countries tell me they regret having done so. Not only that, among our PSEIs, Polytechnics train the largest proportion of students and continues to grow. Today, about 42% of the Primary 1 cohort receives a polytechnic education, compared to just 5% 20 years ago. This percentage will grow to about 45% of the cohort by 2015.

5. Why is it that our Polytechnic sector continues to expand while others have shrunk or eliminated theirs? First, there is increasing demand from students and employers. Approximately 1 in 3 students opt for a polytechnic education when they would have otherwise qualified for admission to our Junior Colleges. On the value of our polytechnic graduates, this is what one of our employers had to say about Singapore Polytechnic graduates. “The graduates ... are ‘industry ready’ the very day they graduate. It (the diploma) produces superb ‘plug and play’ talents who are readily equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge demanded by the industry.” This description broadly describes the value that all our polytechnic graduates bring to the industry.

6. Apart from students' choice and employers' preferences, there are other sound reasons why a Polytechnic education will be increasingly relevant for the next two decades. First, the pace of disruptive technology has increased. We see this in everyday life – for consumer electronics (mobile phones and computing, TV sets and audio devices) but also in other sectors – such as in ICT (cloud computing, open source software and IT security) and healthcare (rapid diagnostics, remote monitoring and sensing). As a result, the old model where one paper qualification obtained before you entered the workforce would last the next 50 years of working life has now become less relevant. Simply because skills and knowledge become obsolete quicker.

7. Second, the tertiary education sector is itself undergoing change globally. For example, China, India and US aim to produce 18 million college graduates a year by 2020. We produce about the equivalent 30,000

Polytechnic and University graduates a year. What this means is that employers will expect not only paper qualifications, but will also look for employees with the relevant skills and work attitude that add to their company.

Strengthening the Polytechnic sector

8. Our polytechnics are also exemplars of how institutions can be responsive to a changing environment. The hallmark of our polytechnic education is its responsiveness to the changing needs of industry. This did not happen by chance. Our polytechnics have systematically built up close links with industry partners, which enabled them to produce consistently good-quality, practice-oriented and industry-relevant graduates who are much sought after by employers in Singapore and overseas. This is why despite a weaker economy in the first half of 2009, polytechnic graduates remain highly employable, with close to 90% finding a job within six months after graduation.

9. MOE will continue to invest in our polytechnics. Earlier this year, I announced that MOE will invest up to \$1 billion to increase the physical capacity of the polytechnics by 20% over the next 4 years. We are also enriching the educational experience for students who qualify for and are keen to pursue a polytechnic education.

More upgrading opportunities for polytechnic graduates

10. Polytechnic education will be further strengthened by the establishment of the Singapore Institute of Technology or SIT to provide opportunities for good polytechnic graduates with some work experience, to upgrade to degree qualifications. Keeping our Polytechnics and SIT as separate entities, but linked, strengthens both institutions. It allows each to focus on their core missions and not dilute key strengths. For SIT students, work experience is valuable, because it focuses the students mind and efforts on the specific skills and knowledge to be sought, which would be relevant to his future career. At SIT, diploma holders will study for another two years before they receive a degree from a reputable foreign university that SIT partners with. These programmes are heavily subsidised by the Government.

11. To date, SIT has launched 10 programmes with 5 overseas university partners, all of which are reputable institutions with high academic standing and strong industry recognition – such as the Technical University of Munich (TUM), Newcastle University, Digipen and University of Nevada Las Vegas. The most recent programme to be introduced is the Bachelor of Professional Studies in Culinary Arts Management, offered in partnership with the Culinary Institute of America. This is good news to those of you who aspire to excel in this field. In the coming year, SIT aims to expand its intake to about 1,000 places. SIT plans to admit 2000 students each year by 2015, introducing new

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programmes in digital media and design, engineering, applied sciences, nursing and allied health.

12. The continued investment in and upgrading of our Polytechnics and SIT will enhance their value proposition to students. However there are further avenues that our Polytechnics can work at to increase their value add. Our Polytechnics can do much better in expanding their R&D to help industries here innovate products and services. In 2009, the National Research Foundation (NRF) had announced a S\$25 Million Translational Research and Development (TRD) grant to fund our polytechnics for projects directed at converting blue sky research done at our universities to a form that can be developed eventually by our industries. At the first grant call award in January 2010, S\$3.57 Million of grants was awarded to our polytechnics in projects such as Temasek Polytechnic's portable biosensor system for early detection of dengue, Nanyang Polytechnic's computer-aided skin disease severity assessment system and Republic Polytechnic's enhanced silk protein for high performance application. This will be increasingly necessary as we seek to improve productivity which often requires technological innovation. Second, networking. Polytechnic graduates have proven themselves to be entrepreneurial, but must learn to hunt in packs – especially so in regional markets of ASEAN, India and China. As an example of how networking brings about benefits to the community at large, Singapore

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Polytechnic Diploma in Optometry students networked with the Lions Club Singapore, Henderson Secondary School, Hoya Lens (S) Pte Ltd and MyLaoHome Hotels and Villas on a community service project to Laos. They brought the “gift of sight” to more than 3800 locals at Luang Prabang providing free eye screening services and handing out more than 4000 recycled spectacles and sunglasses. In another example, two entrepreneurial alumni from Ngee Ann Polytechnic’s School of InfoComm Technology, Kieth Ng and Damon Widjaja, worked together to submit a proposal under the Media Development Authority’s i.JAM (IDM Jump-start and Mentor) Microfunding Scheme to develop a Facebook game and received an award of \$50,000 from Athena Innobator.

13. Our polytechnics have a huge alumni to draw upon resources and establish contacts and networks that can translate into an economic advantage. Both the management and graduates should focus their minds on how to extract value from this vast network. Over the past 10 years, our polytechnics have trained more than 450,000 students. The Government is prepared to incentivise these efforts and therefore recently announced that it will provide matching grants to the polytechnics, ITE and SIT. Endowed donations raised by these institutions will be matched at 1.5:1 for up to 20 years. Non-endowed donations will be matched at 1:1. This will provide for

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more financial assistance, scholarships and enrichment programmes for students enrolled in these institutions.

Conclusion

12. We have a first-class polytechnic sector we can be proud of, one which is admired by other countries. We must keep it that way, and continue to strengthen it. MOE will therefore continue to invest in the polytechnics, and in their students. This will allow our polytechnic sector, and our Singaporeans, to stay relevant and resilient as we head towards 2030.

13. I look forward to hearing the insights that you have gleaned over the past few days. Thank you.

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