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Information Division, Ministry of Communications & Information, 300 Storey, PSA Building, 400 Alexandra Road, Singapore 0511. Tel: 2780781/5

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**SPEECH BY MR S DHANABALAN,
MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT,
AT THE FIRST SESSION OF THE SINGAPORE POLYTECHNIC'S
29TH GRADUATION CEREMONY AT THE KALLANG THEATRE
ON TUESDAY, 1 AUGUST 1989 AT 10.00 AM**

I would, first of all, like to congratulate all the graduands here for having successfully completed their studies at the Singapore Polytechnic. I ought to commend them for having made a wise decision in choosing to pursue a technical education. I ought to also commend their parents for having influenced the graduands in making the right decision. I would also like to congratulate the Singapore Polytechnic for having supplied our industries and commercial enterprises with trained officers over the last 35 years.

This year the Singapore Polytechnic received a record number of applicants for its courses. This shows that more 'O' level school-leavers are realising that a polytechnic diploma may be more suitable for them instead of a degree.

I am not saying that everyone should try to enrol in a polytechnic. Students who do well academically should go to a junior college because a general, broad-based, 'A' level course does give them wider scope for further educational development. However, those who do not do so well academically and those who prefer practical, job-related training, should consider the options which a polytechnic provides.

A technical education does have several plus points. It takes 16 year-olds fresh from their 'O' levels, and gives them a good, career-oriented training that will equip them for a job immediately after graduation. It also provides them with a firm foundation for further development, either through advanced specialised training or through a degree course.

In the three years that students take to obtain a diploma, they are exposed, very quickly, to experiences which help them to mature and develop character. That is why there are many success stories of Poly graduates who have succeeded as top notch managers and entrepreneurs.

The relevance and value of a technical education is also borne out by the good employment prospects that Poly diploma holders have been enjoying. Even during the years of slower economic growth, Poly grads have fared relatively well.

Annual surveys show that newly graduated Poly students, whether they are male or female, enjoy starting salaries that compare favourably with general degree-holders.

Recently the Government announced that Poly graduates would be given equal priority as 'A' level holders for entry to the engineering and hard science degree courses at our universities, provided they meet the admission standards set by the institutions. In announcing this, the Government recognises the need to develop our scarce manpower to its fullest potential and to develop the aspirations of many Poly diploma-holders who wish to upgrade themselves by obtaining a degree.

Even for those of you who have set your sights on getting a degree, I would urge you to work for a few years before you continue your studies. You will find the

experience invaluable in your personal and career development - experience which you cannot get from books and study alone.

Although I know that many of you who are receiving your diplomas today will aspire to obtain a degree, I would like to point out that the economy needs, and will need, technologists and mid-level supervisors. Let me assure you that the market will have to pay adequately to attract the technologists and mid-level supervisors.

I, therefore, expect that for most of you, a Poly diploma will take you to career destinations that are interesting and rewarding. It need not be a stage of your journey towards getting a degree.

The desire to obtain a degree is often spurred on by the commonly held view that degree-holders should be paid more than diploma-holders. There are historical reasons for this view and we may never be able to eradicate it totally. This view, however, is not prevalent world-wide because in many developed countries the earnings of some mid-level technologists match or even surpass what degree-holders earn.

There is bound to be a salary gap at the entry level between the Poly graduate and a degree-holder because it does take two to three years longer to acquire a degree than a diploma. But our modern science and technology-based economy cannot function and grow without mid-level technologists and supervisors. It is the pivotal role of such personnel that has narrowed the earnings gap between diploma and degree-holders in many developed countries. The trend, in Singapore, will be no different. I am pleased to learn that as the Singapore Polytechnic equips its students with state-of-the-art, technical skills that the market demands, its graduates are already rapidly catching up with degree-holders as far as wages go.

On this happy note, I would like to wish all the graduands of the Singapore Polytechnic success in your careers.

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