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**SPEECH BY DR TONY TAN KENG YAM, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION,  
AT THE VICTORIA JUNIOR COLLEGE'S SEVENTH COLLEGE DAY 1991  
HELD AT THE VICTORIA JUNIOR COLLEGE  
ON SATURDAY, 13 JULY 1991 AT 4.30 PM**

Let me first thank your principal and the Victoria Advisory and Executive Committees for very kindly inviting my wife and me to join you on your College Day.

I first visited Victoria Junior College (VJC) in April 1986 when I was visiting the junior colleges in Singapore in order to familiarise myself with their missions, their aims and goals and how they saw themselves contributing to the overall education system in Singapore.

During my visit to VJC, I met with your principal, members of the VJC Advisory and Executive Committees and senior staff members. One of the matters which we discussed at the meeting was the mission of Victoria Junior College. Mrs Lee, your principal, told my colleagues and me that it was her intention to develop VJC as an academic college of excellence with particular emphasis on arts and science and selected extra-curricular activities so as to achieve the all round development of VJC students. When I asked Mrs Lee what she considered to be VJC's strengths, she replied that her main asset in building up VJC was a young and enthusiastic staff who related well with students and who would grow with the College. My colleagues and I in the Ministry were impressed with the clear presentation of your College's goals and objectives. We encouraged VJC to pursue its plans and assured the College of the Ministry's support and assistance when necessary.

It is therefore a pleasure for my colleagues and me to return to VJC and see the results of your planning and hard work. Much has been achieved in the last five years. New facilities have been added. New programmes such as Theatre Studies and the Language Elective Programme in French have been started. More teachers (88 in number) have been recruited to complement and work with the 25 pioneer teachers who have been with VJC since its establishment.

VJC is now recognised to be in the forefront of junior colleges in Singapore. I congratulate all of you who have helped to make VJC a success. Your principal, your teachers, members of your Advisory and Executive Committees, non-academic staff and students, all of you can be proud of what you have achieved at VJC.

In recent weeks, there has been much discussion in the press about likely changes in tertiary education in Singapore. As junior college students, who will be sitting for your 'A' levels this year or next year, tertiary education is a topic which, I am sure, is of interest to all of you. I would therefore like to take a few minutes this afternoon to outline the Ministry's thinking on what needs to be done in the field of tertiary education to complement the changes in primary and secondary school education, which were announced earlier this year.

The improvements, which we are making to our primary and secondary school system, will increase the number of students who can qualify for university education. At the same time, our intention to further expand polytechnic education will increase the number of polytechnic graduates who may wish to continue their studies at the university level and complement their polytechnic diplomas with a university degree. With the high regard which Singaporeans have for education, there is therefore likely to be a significantly increased demand for university education in the coming years.

The Government's basic approach towards meeting this increased demand for university education is to make available in Singapore a variety of tertiary institutions offering different courses and different modes of learning so as to give students more options for study at the university level. Towards this end, the Ministry of Education will pursue the following objectives:

- (1) Further expansion and development of NUS and NTU;
- (2) Allowing more distance learning programmes to be set up in Singapore to pave the way for the possible establishment of private universities; and
- (3) Setting up an Open University to cater for people who are already in the workforce or students who can only study on a part-time basis.

Let me explain each of these objectives in turn.

NUS and NTU together constitute the flagship of our tertiary education system in Singapore. They are our premier institutions. The two Universities will maintain high academic standards, admit the best students from our junior colleges and polytechnics and set the pace for research and academic development.

NUS and NTU together admitted some 7,300 students this year, with NUS admitting 4,300 students and NTU 3,000 students. There is room for further growth in the Universities' enrolment, particularly at NTU. When NTU is fully developed in 1995, NTU should be able to admit some 4,500 students each year. In four to five years' time, NUS and NTU together will be able to admit each year some 9,000 students, an increase of 1,700 students compared to 1991.

In addition to taking in more students, NUS and NTU are also revising their admission requirements to give students more flexibility in their choice of subjects. This will mean that, subject to capacity constraints, students will be able to study subjects at university which are different from the subjects they

studied at junior college or at the polytechnic. In this way, students will have a wider choice of subjects at NUS and NTU.

Even with the increase in NUS and NTU's enrolment, it is unlikely that the two universities will be sufficient to cater for the many Singaporeans who aspire to have a university education. 2,000 to 3,000 Singapore students each year go overseas for university study. Some of these students go overseas to study courses which are not available in Singapore. Other students may go overseas because they would like to have a wider exposure or experience a different culture or a different education system. However, a considerable number of students go overseas for university study because they are unable to gain admission into NUS or NTU.

To meet the demand for more university places, the Ministry will adopt a more liberal policy concerning requests by private organisations in Singapore to conduct distance learning degree programmes in collaboration with overseas universities. This will give students a wider choice of tertiary institutions to choose from when they graduate from junior college or from the polytechnic. To ensure that there is some control over the quality of degree programmes to be offered in Singapore, approval by the Ministry for organisations to conduct distance learning programmes in Singapore will be subject to three conditions:

- (a) The Singapore organisation must have adequate resources (both teaching manpower and physical facilities) to conduct the programmes;
- (b) the overseas partner must be a university or tertiary institution of good standing; and
- (c) the degree awarded must be in the name of the overseas university.

In addition to providing an alternative route to university education, the distance learning programmes can also help to meet the needs of workers who wish to do part-time study to upgrade their skills or general knowledge. Distance learning

programmes can thus provide avenues for post employment upgrading and more opportunities for mature students to pursue management or other business courses for their career development. If the scheme works out well, there is no reason why such collaborative efforts between Singapore organisations and reputable overseas universities cannot in time lead to the establishment of private universities in Singapore.

The expansion of NUS and NTU and the establishment of more distance learning programmes in Singapore will make it possible for more students to study at the university level on a full-time basis. To meet particularly the needs of workers and students who can only study on a part-time basis, the Government will set up an Open University to provide modular and part-time courses so that students can study at times convenient to their work or home schedules.

Two options for the Open University are being considered by the Ministry of Education. The first option is to have an entirely separate government-run institution with its own campus, staff, production facilities, delivery systems, media broadcasting networks and conveniently located study centres. The institution could conduct a comprehensive range of courses, catering mainly for working adults, and award its own degrees, diplomas and certificates. An example of such an institution is the Open University in England.

The second option being considered by the Ministry of Education is to set up an institution which will be linked closely with professional organisations and the Labour Movement and use the services of NUS, NTU and the Polytechnics. This institution would co-ordinate the conduct of part-time and modular courses by the Universities and Polytechnics and other educational institutions in Singapore and make use of the organisation and the teaching and physical resources presently available in existing institutions. The institution would, however, set its own admission standards and requirements for graduation. In other words, students could attend part-time or modular courses at NUS, NTU and the Polytechnics or other

educational institutions and, when they have accumulated a sufficient number of credits, they could receive degrees or diplomas from this institution.

The setting up of an Open University requires further consideration by the Ministry to ensure that we have an institution which will be cost effective and serve the needs of Singaporeans. The Ministry is presently studying the operations of Open Universities in countries overseas. If no unforeseen circumstances arise, the Ministry should be able to make a decision on which option to adopt within the next few months.

The measures which I have described above will, when implemented, increase the pool of trained manpower in Singapore and help to create a better educated workforce and society. However, I would be remiss in my duty if I did not point out that expanding university education liberally can lead to some undesirable consequences.

The first undesirable consequences is deterioration in academic standards. We can guard against this consequence to some extent by exercising control over admission standards such as requiring tertiary institutions in Singapore, whether government or private, to adhere to minimum admission requirements such as 'A' levels or polytechnic diplomas.

But with more institutions offering tertiary level qualifications in Singapore, it is inevitable that, in time, not all university qualifications will be able to maintain the same high academic standards. Students will have to consider carefully which institution and which course they choose to enrol in and employers will have to evaluate the quality and standing of the degrees awarded by the various institutions.

The second undesirable consequence which can arise from over rapid expansion of university education is unbalanced manpower development leading to graduate unemployment. Up to now, the intakes into our polytechnics and universities have been closely tied to manpower projections of the Ministry of Trade and Industry. While these projections may have been on the

conservative side, they have had the great benefit of ensuring that our economy has been provided with the type and number of manpower that it needs and Singapore has been spared the problem of graduate unemployment which has been a distressing and unsettling feature in many developing countries. An undesirable consequence of a more liberal tertiary education environment could be an over supply of graduates with non-technical degrees which the economy might not be able to absorb. Conversely, fresh school leavers who might otherwise pursue technical courses at the polytechnics might be diverted into non-technical courses and this could result in a short fall of technologists and technicians required by Singapore in the future.

To ensure that the expansion of university education does not deviate too much from our manpower needs, the Ministry of Education, together with MTI, will have to monitor the type of courses that will be offered by the various tertiary institutions in Singapore and take corrective action from time to time if it appears that too many students are going into courses which are not likely to benefit the economy or lead to employment.

To sum up, the outlook is for a more varied university education scenario in the coming years with more options and choices for students. Those of you who will be graduating from Victoria Junior College in the coming years, will be well prepared to take advantage of the opportunities which will be available. As you pursue your studies and further your careers, I hope that you will continue to be a credit to your college and in later life, will come back and give VJC the support and encouragement that your college deserves.

May I wish VJC all success in the coming years.

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