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SPEECH BY MR CHAI CHONG YII, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE  
FOR EDUCATION, AT THE 19TH CONVOCATION OF NANYANG  
UNIVERSITY ON 12 AUGUST 1978 AT 10.00 AM  
IN THE UNIVERSITY AUDITORIUM

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## IDEALS AND REALITY

Today is indeed an auspicious day for you. In your caps and gowns, you are formally joining the ranks of university graduates. According to education statistics in Singapore, only one out of every 20 persons in your age group completes his or her university education. You can be considered therefore as among the fortunate few.

However, I know as a fact that among your predecessors, there are some who were not at all elated at the prospect of graduation. On the contrary, they felt unhappy and lost because they had not been successful in finding suitable employment. Actually, this is not a situation peculiar to our society: it is an experience shared by countless graduates all over the world. The only difference is that the numbers involved may vary somewhat from case to case.

Among the more serious problems faced by Nanyang graduates in seeking employment, the most important one is undoubtedly their lack of proficiency in the English language. Once this major hurdle is cleared, the other minor problems will naturally be solved.

This, as you know, is precisely what has been done. For the sake of resolving once and for all this fundamental problem, the Nanyang University authorities, with due approval and support of the Government, has boldly implemented the policy on the language of instruction. It is working closely with the University of Singapore in a joint effort to produce for the nation graduates who are equally effective in Chinese and

English. This radical step was taken entirely in response to requests from the public and the parents and students and, at the same time, taking into account the interest of the community and the nation in the long run. Three years from now, the Nantah graduates will be able to meet the needs of our society and make even greater contribution to the national good.

The present batch of graduates, as well as those of the next two interim years, will naturally be at a slight disadvantage. But no human problem is really insurmountable - they can overcome this handicap by facing reality and putting in a greater personal effort. They can devote their next one or two years to concentrating exclusively on improving their English, building on what they have already acquired. Their efforts will bear ample rewards. I'm sure the Nanyang University authorities have already made the appropriate arrangements to help the present second and third year students, and even those who have graduated, so that their prospects of competing successfully in the employment market will be enhanced.

The medium of instruction at all tertiary institutions is and will be English. This fact will have a direct effect on the policy regarding the language of instruction at the Pre-University and secondary school levels. Adjustments will thus have to be made accordingly so that those pupils who have the ambition and the academic ability will not be denied their chance to enter the university. The Ministry of Education has recently sent a group of English language teachers over and above the normal staff quota to Chinese medium secondary schools to help strengthen

the English language instruction programme. Because of the changing curricular and instructional requirements, the Ministry of Education will continue to meet the requests of the schools for additional English language teachers. The aim is to create a more conducive learning environment and thus raise the standard of English among the Chinese medium school pupils, especially among the top students, so that they can be on an equal footing with their counterparts in the English medium schools. When the standard of English has been raised, the future of the Chinese medium schools, with their excellent tradition which they have upheld through the years will, I believe, be as bright and as promising as ever.

In a competitive society where only the fittest will survive, ideals and reality do not always coincide. Ideals are pure and beautiful, unfettered and unconstrained. Reality, on the other hand, is confusing, complex and ever-changing. The university is the cherished nourishing ground for one's ideals. However, one's university years form but a small part of the multi-faceted richness of life. You are now stepping into the crucible of life itself. Whether you can stand up to the test and attain the strength and hardness of steel or will weaken under the heat and pressure and be melted down as scrap depends entirely on whether you have the courage to face the hard facts and not try to shift the blame on others. As the Chinese proverb puts it very well: "It is more practical to mend your nets than covet the fish in the deep." Anger or complaint will not solve problems. To be able to achieve something in life, one must clearly understand the current trend and development, and prepare oneself to move in the right direction, bearing in mind that the course of action does not mean going against one's own integrity and principles. Only then can one ensure good progress and ultimate success. Finally, let me congratulate you graduates and wish you a smooth journey in a life crowned with aspiration, courage and achievement.