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We understand that Minister Teo Chee Hean might change the contents of his speech at the Annual Dinner of the Harvard Club of Singapore tonight. Media are advised to check against delivery.

MITA DUTY OFFICER

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SPEECH BY RADM TEO CHEE HEAN, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND 2ND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE AT HARVARD CLUB OF SINGAPORE ANNUAL DINNER ON WEDNESDAY 22 SEPTEMBER 1999 AT GRAND BALLROOM RITZ CARLTON HOTEL @ 8.50 PM

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"Our Education:

Rooted in Singapore but Open to the World"

Mr Lee Keen Whye

President, Harvard Club of Singapore

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me first thank the Harvard Club of Singapore for inviting my wife and I to join you at this dinner tonight.

As Harvard alumni, we all have fond memories of our time at Harvard. Our education at Harvard has undoubtedly enriched our lives by allowing us to interact with intelligent, talented and motivated individuals from all over the U.S and the world. It is this common link that binds us tonight.

Developing a Vibrant Higher Education Sector

The fact that Harvard is able to positively impact the lives of this roomful of people half-way around the globe is testimony to the strength of the education provided at Harvard.

The U.S. higher education sector possesses an incredible diversity, in terms of educational philosophy, course offerings, student mix and course quality. This has proven to be a magnet for a wide range of students from all over the world.

At the top end of the spectrum, a renowned university like Harvard is able to attract top teachers and researchers. These in turn attract top undergraduate and postgraduate students, establishing a virtuous circle of talent attraction and innovation.

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In Singapore, our universities aspire to reach the highest standards. It is difficult to do so across the board, but there are already pockets of excellence and promising developments in a number of fields.

But let us pause a moment to ponder why it is important for Singapore to have top class universities. Singapore aspires to be a knowledge based economy in the coming years. The intellectual driving force for this knowledge-based economy must come from our universities where our best and brightest students develop and grow. To compete globally the graduates of our universities must be able to hold their own against their counterparts from anywhere in the world – in terms of professional knowledge, their ability and willingness to adapt to new situations, their eagerness to seek out new knowledge and new opportunities.

It is therefore certainly not sufficient for our universities merely to aspire to be the best in the nation, nor even in the region, but to rank with the best in the world. To rank among the best we must benchmark ourselves against the best.

Here I return again to Harvard and the US. One important lesson for us from the Harvard experience is the importance of being open to talent and good ideas, whatever their origin. While we can draw able and talented people from our population of 3 million, we can do a lot better and achieve world-class reputation only if we are prepared to draw on the talents of the wider world. We need to do so by collaborating with renowned centres of learning and research, and by being a magnet for people with ability and talent.

To encourage an outward orientation and a global perspective among staff and students, our universities have developed and intensified a network of educational exchanges and collaboration, including institutional student and staff exchanges and research collaborations. We have student exchanges and cross accreditation for courses with some of the top universities in US, Europe and Asia. This cross accreditation by top international universities is an important indicator of the quality and standards of the courses conducted by our universities. As a university, you are, in a sense, defined by the company you keep.

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As a city-state, Singapore aspires to become one of the great global centres where people, ideas and capital come together to spark new and exciting opportunities. The universities play a big part in the first of these two – people and ideas.

In 1997, both NUS and NTU stepped up their efforts to attract foreign talent, after having expanded to first cater to local students who can benefit from a university education. The results have been encouraging. The proportion of foreign students in the undergraduate intake of NUS and NTU increased from 10% in 1997 to 17% in 1999.

The Universities have also been strengthening their research activities and have made significant increases in their intake of postgraduate research students. They have also been reorienting their undergraduate programmes to encourage more

creative and entrepreneurial thinking.

To further our strategic intent to develop Singapore as a centre for educational excellence, we have also attracted world-class universities to come to Singapore, either to set up branch campuses or to establish collaborations with NUS or NTU. Our higher education sector has indeed been much enriched by the presence of institutions such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Johns Hopkins University, INSEAD, and the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business. A third university, the Singapore Management University (SMU), is presently collaborating closely with The Wharton School on the design of its curriculum, and will establish the Wharton-SMU Research Centre to boost international business research, with a specific focus on the Asian region.

A vibrant, high-quality, university education sector is a vital asset and factor in Singapore's transition to a knowledge-based economy.

Innovations in School Education

Fostering openness to the world and new ideas should not be limited to the tertiary sector. Singapore has a sound and effective education system well known for its academic excellence and rigour.

With globalisation and the mobility of information, there are now greater opportunities to build upon these solid foundations to find out and learn from what other countries are doing to school their young. Singapore is seizing these opportunities to give our students a more rounded educational experience. Through the use of information technology and the Internet, teachers and even young primary school students have an unprecedented opportunity to interact and share ideas with their counterparts from all over the world.

This frees our teachers and students from the traditional boundaries of the school. Our teachers and students can have an educational experience that goes beyond their textbooks and the physical confines of their classrooms; and beyond the limits of their own experience bounded by the immediate surroundings of their schools.

By interacting with their counterparts elsewhere and collaborating with them in joint projects, our students will have a better appreciation of the rest of the world and how they and Singapore fit in.

Language too plays an important role in preparing our young people to meet the challenges of globalisation. English has become the de facto language of international business, air travel, high technology and the internet. The information and knowledge boom places a high priority on timely access to new information. Time is money, and timely access to information depends on language ability.

It is yet unclear how internet and IT will interact with language usage. Today English is dominant on the net. But IT itself may one day provide machine translation that is effective enough to overcome most of the practical barriers of language differences. Until that day, ability in a language that is widely used globally is a highly valuable asset.

I had an interesting visit to Finland earlier this year. The Finns' have been able to find niche competencies in which they have been able to compete globally. With a population not much bigger than Singapore's they have developed world class telecommunications companies. These are supported by universities and research centres. They are investing heavily in their educational and research institutions in the information industries of the future. The Linux operating system has its origins in Finland. They are one of the most intensive users, on a per capita basis, of telecommunications and internet technology.

Underpinning their emergence as an information and knowledge economy is their competency and attitude towards "multi-lingualism". At school, the Finns learn Finnish, Swedish, English and one other language like French, German or Russian. Most of them are effectively multilingual. Although they focus heavily on languages, they have also found time to learn other things that place them high up on the international technological ladder.

More remarkably, they have accepted the advantages and importance of learning more than English and their mother tongue, even though the population is fairly homogeneous. As we continue to emphasise bilingualism in our more complex language and cultural context, it is heartening to note that we are not alone in our efforts to ensure that children are effective in more than one language. While our imperative may be slightly different in aiming to root our children in our mother tongues to appreciate their cultural roots, we also share a similar goal of trying to ensure proficiency in standard English to ensure that our population can plug into the world economy.

Rooted to Singapore

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However, being open to the world, opening our minds to ideas from other countries, and having an outward orientation is only one half of the story. Will globalisation and international collaboration result in homogenisation? And will this be desirable?

What unique contributions do educational institutions in Singapore make? Our educational institutions must be open to the world, but they must also be rooted in Singapore.

It would be a great loss if Singapore's educational institutions and its graduates are unrecognisable from institutions and graduates from elsewhere in the

world. Apart from providing knowledge, skills and attitudes that make our graduates 'world ready', our educational institutions, in particular our universities also have the responsibility of collectively being the intellectual soul of Singapore.

To be truly top class institutions our universities must have an impact on society. Our universities must crystallise, embody and transmit the essence of the 'Singapore idea' – what Singapore and Singaporeans should be, what Singapore and Singaporeans can be.

While we can look for good ideas, techniques and systems elsewhere, and seek to establish collaborations and exchanges, we should filter and extract lessons that are relevant to Singapore.

The starting point is a sound understanding of our local context and the clarity of mind to distinguish the relevant from what may be less so.

One unique circumstance that every successive generation of Singaporeans needs to understand is our journey to independence and the ideals and dreams that our founding generation strived for – in essence why we are what we are, and why it is worthwhile for us to continue to strive to seek our own path.

We must also realise the limits that small size, small population and a lack of natural resources place on us. But at the same time we must know how to overcome these limitations and turn them into advantages.

By internalising these basic factors, we acquire a realistic appreciation of the challenges and circumstances that we face and develop a well-founded confidence in our future.

We will also find our own unique path when it comes to developing the qualities of good citizenship. Citizenship education in itself is not unique. It is carried out in the US, in Britain and elsewhere. But what is unique to each country are the choices that it has made with regard to how it has decided to organise itself – for example the balance between rights and responsibilities, or whether it is a secular state or there is a state religion.

For Singapore, the key organising principles include meritocracy, multi-racialism, and the understanding that those who have been more successful have an obligation towards those who have not.

Conclusion

The way forward for our education system therefore lies in establishing a balance between being open to the outside world and "rootedness" to home. This will determine whether our people will be 'world ready' while at the same time committed to Singapore and their fellow Singaporeans. This is a challenge that educators from all over the world face. I am quietly confident that we will be able to achieve this fine balance and take our education system forward.

In closing, I wish you all, the Harvard Community of Scholars, a wonderful evening filled with food, fun and laughter.

Thank you.

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