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**ADDRESS BY MR S ISWARAN, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF TRADE & INDUSTRY AND MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, SINGAPORE, AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 2<sup>nd</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON VOCATIONAL & TECHNICAL EDUCATION, HELD ON 9 JULY 2009, AT 0900 HOURS, AT GRAND COPTHORNE WATERFRONT, SINGAPORE**

**Mr Bob Tan,**  
Chairman, ITE Board of Governors

**Mr Bruce Poh,**  
Director & Chief Executive Officer, ITE

**Dr Benjamin Tan,**  
Chairman/Conference Organising Committee

**Chairpersons and Speakers**

**Distinguished Guests and Delegates**

**Ladies & Gentlemen**

### **Introduction**

Good morning.

1 It gives me great pleasure to join you at the Opening Ceremony of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Vocational and Technical Education. I would like to extend a warm welcome to all delegates and, in particular, I wish our guests from overseas an enjoyable and memorable stay in Singapore.

2 This Conference brings together international and local Vocational and Technical Education (or VTE) policy-makers, practitioners and experts. The

focus is on the further improvement of VTE to meet current and future challenges.

### **Investing in VTE**

- 3 We meet today against the backdrop of the most severe global economic crisis in the last half century or more. It has affected countries, enterprises and individuals across the globe. This situation is high on the global agenda and it affects the deliberations of all policy-makers. Nations around the world are now keenly focused on optimizing public expenditure, saving jobs and creating employment for their citizens. Putting policies in place to secure the welfare of citizens and to restore business confidence and economic growth are top national priorities.
  
- 4 Yet, despite this uncertainty, we need to look beyond the current downturn and plan for future broad-based economic growth. A key ingredient for opportunities and growth in tomorrow's knowledge-based economy is investment in education, today.
  
- 5 Education is the path to knowledge, skills and values. It empowers individuals, enables the creation of wealth, and promotes social and economic mobility. These are important goals for VTE, where education systems must focus their efforts on the segment of students who may thrive with a more practice-oriented mode of instruction, unlike their academically-oriented counterparts. These technically-inclined students have different strengths, talents and learning styles. Thus, their potential to succeed in their careers

and lives must be supported through an appropriately-designed educational experience.

- 6 In its World Development Report 2007, the World Bank noted that upper secondary and higher education still has a heavy academic focus. It, however, also recognised that the academic-centric bias in education is slowly losing its dominance around the world, with the appearance of more technical institutions, polytechnics and community colleges. The shift in focus towards VTE requires governments around the world - especially in developing countries - to have the resolve to make essential changes to their education systems. More importantly, governments must be willing and able to provide the investment required for the VTE sector to grow.

### **The VTE System in Singapore**

- 7 You might already be aware that in 2007, Singapore's ITE received the Harvard-IBM Innovations Award for Transforming Government from the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation. The panel of assessors from the Ash Institute, which is part of Harvard University's John F Kennedy School of Government, was impressed by the strong and visible impact our ITE has had on the lives of Singaporeans. Equally as important, the panel saw ITE's transformation experience as something which could be replicated by education institutions around the world. I am, therefore, pleased that this Conference is being held as part of ITE's commitment to the Ash Institute to help other VTE institutions learn from Singapore's and ITE's experience.

- 8 In Singapore, the steady growth and social acceptance of VTE can be attributed to a number of factors – in particular, the government’s commitment to and investment in VTE; the strong partnership between industry and VTE institutions; and the focus on ensuring a high level of employability for VTE graduates. Each individual VTE institution has also sought to continually enhance the quality of its education and establish its unique standing. I am sure you will have the chance to learn more from each of them over the next few days.
- 9 Since Singapore embarked on an industrialisation drive after gaining independence in 1965, we have conscientiously developed VTE as an important component of our mainstream education system. Our economic growth hinges on the capabilities and competitiveness of our human capital which is our key resource. As a matter of policy, all young Singaporeans receive at least 10 years of general education before the majority of them progress to post-secondary education. Today, the majority of each year’s graduating school cohort goes on to receive post-secondary education at one of our VTE institutions comprising the five Polytechnics and the ITE. Currently 42% of the cohort proceeds to the polytechnics. At the same time ITE provides places for about a quarter of the cohort of school leavers.
- 10 The Ministry of Education (or MOE) seeks to maximise the potential of each student by emphasising an interest-driven and ability-based education that caters to the different learning styles of different groups of students. In line with this, Singapore’s VTE system is built on two related but distinct aspects — vocational training and technical education. ITE’s primary mission is to

provide practical vocational training to develop skilled manpower for the economy. The polytechnics, on the other hand, primarily aim to deliver technical education to train technologists with industry-relevant knowledge and skills. The polytechnics also promote innovation and entrepreneurship as their secondary mission. While ITE and the polytechnics differ in their roles and missions, both seek to provide a holistic education, nurturing our students with positive values, attitudes and a global outlook which prepares them, not just for the workplace, but for life itself.

- 11 To enhance the relevance and attractiveness of VTE in Singapore, the Government has also sought to expand upgrading pathways for VTE graduates to meet both their aspirations and the evolving needs of industry. Graduates from ITE have been able to upgrade their skills through various types of diploma courses at the polytechnics for some time now. They have had options to do this either as full-time students immediately after graduation, or part-time as they obtain work experience. However, MOE plans to do more.
- 12 Firstly, MOE will be looking into increasing the progression rate of ITE graduates to full time polytechnic courses in the next few years. In addition, to provide greater access to a diploma qualification for its graduates, ITE has started offering targeted diploma programmes in collaboration with reputable international institutions. These programmes such as Machine Technology and Automotive Engineering are aimed at industry's needs in specific areas which are not met by our polytechnics and more suited to the skills-oriented education offered by ITE.

- 13 Secondly, polytechnic graduates will be given more opportunities to pursue industry-relevant and reputable degrees in Singapore, in areas not offered by our local universities. Since 2005, our polytechnics have partnered foreign universities to offer degree courses aligned with Singapore's manpower needs. Today, there are 6 such programmes. A new institution, the Singapore Institute of Applied Technology (SIAT) will be set up to offer more degree programmes in collaboration with our polytechnics and reputable foreign university partners. These programmes will be offered in niche areas of industry growth and tailored to build on the applied learning, industry-oriented approach of polytechnic education. This is an example of how VTE can complement academic education to serve as an attractive and market-relevant education option.
- 14 I understand that some of the international delegates have visited ITE College East, our first ITE regional campus, during the Pre-conference sharing yesterday. The vibrancy and excitement there is a reflection of the modern and industry-relevant teaching and learning environment at our Polytechnics and ITE. It is also an indication of the Singapore Government's resolve and commitment to investment in soft and hard infrastructure in the VTE sector.
- 15 In 2002, the government decided to consolidate ITE's smaller campuses into a "One ITE System, Three Colleges" Governance and Education Model to enhance the delivery of ITE education. Besides ITE College East, the government will invest in two more regional campuses – ITE College West and ITE College Central – to be ready by 2010 and 2012 respectively. Under

this model, each college will have the critical mass to innovate, optimise resources and offer a better overall educational experience for its students. This also enables each college to specialise in different areas of industry growth, while offering similar courses in core, high demand areas such as IT and Engineering.

- 16 To keep up with the changing trends and demands of the economy, our VTE institutions have also established strong partnerships with enterprises and other industry stakeholders. The close engagement of industry is vital, not only in providing technical support and industrial attachment opportunities, but also in understanding and projecting manpower needs, identifying new courses to offer and designing the curriculum. In response to the changing needs of industry, the five Polytechnics introduced a range of new courses in 2009, from Aerospace Engineering to Clean Energy and Nanotechnology & Materials Science. Likewise, ITE has launched new courses this year, in areas such as Leisure and Travel Operations, Medical Manufacturing Technology and Space Design.
- 17 The close partnership of our VTE institutions with industry is also reflected in the positive employment outcomes of their graduates. Employment rates remain high while average salaries have increased from 2007. These findings are heartening and continue to be an important measure of the attractiveness and success of VTE in Singapore.

## **Conclusion**

- 18 As VTE rises in significance and stature, education institutions around the world have to adapt to the evolving environment and create innovative learning programmes and environments. This would allow learners to receive a holistic and market-relevant education. Ultimately, we have to build VTE systems that are able to support each nation's skilled manpower requirements and develop graduates who are able to contribute effectively to our social and economic growth, both locally and globally.
- 19 I am confident that this Conference will provide valuable insights and give new impetus to champion the further growth of VTE in your respective countries and institutions. Through the sharing and networking sessions, I hope that you will bring home many useful learning points, which will inspire and enable you to build successful VTE systems that are responsive and relevant to your organisation's and to your country's needs. I wish you all a meaningful and rewarding conference. I now declare the Conference open.

Thank you.