

**SPEECH BY MR ONG YE KUNG, MINISTER FOR
EDUCATION (HIGHER EDUCATION & SKILLS), AT THE ITE
GRADUATION CEREMONY 2017, AT THE TAY ENG SOON
CONVENTION CENTRE, ON 25 JULY 2017, 2:30PM**

Ms Low Khah Gek, Director & CEO, ITE

Members of the ITE Board of Governors, Your Excellencies,

Staff, Alumni

Parents and graduands

Ladies and gentlemen

Introduction

1. Congratulations to the 2017 graduating class of ITE. You have worked hard to get to where you are today. A lot of sweat, maybe a few tears, hopefully no blood.
2. Some of you have had to balance school with multiple responsibilities, and overcome hurdles and obstacles. But you persevered. Today, we celebrate your success, together with the people who have supported you along your journey – your family, your friends, and your mentors. To you, and your loved ones – congratulations!

3. I know that ITE graduates are always concerned about your ability to find work, or to further your studies. I know because I am a regular visitor to ITE. Every 2-3 months, I will come to one of the ITE campuses to talk to the students about their education and career choices, and engage in dialogues with them. Today's graduation is an extension of our engagement.

4. MOE pays close attention to your progression, so today, let me talk about your work, and your further studies.

Positive Employment Outcomes for ITE Graduates

5. Let me start with work. MOE has just tabulated the top line employment outcomes of ITE graduates that stepped into the workforce last year. This includes both students who are fresh out of ITE, as well as those who have completed their full time national service and decided to join the workforce. Overall, the results are encouraging.

6. First, the employment rate has gone up by 3.5% from a year ago, to almost 87%. This tells us that the economy continues to create jobs. In fact, the EDB has projected that this year, it should secure \$8 billion to \$10 billion in fixed-asset expenditure, which could create between 19,000 and 21,000 new jobs when the investments are fully injected. In the sectors that need more talent and manpower, they are looking for people with skills and technical knowhow. These are the skills that you have acquired through ITE.

7. Second, the starting salaries of ITE graduates continue to hold steady, even going up if we take a multi-year perspective. From 2012 to 2016, the median salaries of ITE graduates have increased by 20%, from around \$1,500 to \$1,800. If we compare just 2015 and 2016, the overall median salaries have held steady. For the subset of post national service ITE graduates, median starting salaries reached \$2,000 for the first time. The overall signal is that your skills continue to be valued by employers, and the upward trend will likely continue, so long as we keep the training focussed and relevant, and our students continue to be eager to learn.

8. Third, part-time, temporary, and freelance work continue to be on the rise. A large part of this is driven by more ITE graduates wanting to work temporarily while they await further studies. Another possible reason driving this trend is the rise of the gig economy, and more students taking up informal or freelance work. What is important is whether such work is done voluntarily or involuntarily. The good thing is that the vast majority of ITE graduates in part-time or temporary work have chosen to do so voluntarily, with almost half doing so in order to pursue further studies. The proportion of ITE graduates who are in temporary or part-time jobs involuntarily, fell further in 2016, to well below 3%.

9. Overall, the employment picture for ITE graduates who choose to enter the workforce is an encouraging one. So long as Singapore's economy continues to do well, the opportunities will get better. The economy is changing due to technological advancement in areas such as IT and robotics, but the education system is also changing to prepare you for these changes. By entering the workforce and finding a good job, you can continue to learn on the job, hone your skills, and build upon the foundation laid here at ITE.

New ITE Work-Learn Technical Diploma

10. Now let me talk about your studies. Every year, about a quarter of ITE graduates move on to polytechnics. It is not an easy transition, from a hands-on environment to a more academic environment, and ITE students have to work very hard to perform at polytechnic. But many did well, in fact, very well.

11. Every year, close to 15% of ITE graduates who entered polytechnics emerge in the top quartile of polytechnic graduates in terms of GPA. For ICT and Health Science courses, where the content taught in the polytechnic builds on the foundation that they gained in their ITE education, ITE graduates have performed even better. About a third of them scored in the top quartile of their cohort, outperforming their classmates who entered the polytechnics from the secondary schools. They were able to benefit from such pathways to hone their skills further.

12. Having said that, education is a means to an end, which is to prepare our students to lead fulfilling and meaningful lives. So what you do after graduation arguably matters more than the results you get.

Compared to polytechnic students, ITE students are more likely to work after graduating from polytechnics. That is not a bad thing at all, because we do learn a lot from work, and if we want to study further, we can always do so after a few years of work experience.

13. But what is troubling is that for ITE graduates who complete polytechnic education and still wish to pursue further studies, many choose to study in fields unrelated to their ITE and polytechnic education. This means that they are leaving their skills, and years of education and experience that they have built up.

14. This is ultimately a student's own life choices. But we want to expand the pathways for ITE graduates, beyond the existing diploma options at the polytechnics, so that more may decide to further their studies in related fields, to build on their existing knowledge and skills. One pathway that the Government has been advocating is the work-study pathway. This is a reflection of the key shift in our higher education landscape, to place greater emphasis on education through 'learning by doing'.

15. One example is the Earn-and-Learn programme, a key initiative of the SkillsFuture movement. It provides fresh ITE and polytechnic graduates with more structured on-the-job training to improve their skills, leading to industry-recognised qualifications that will be valuable in their future jobs, or when they choose to upgrade their skills again. Today, I would like to share with you more details on a particular 'learning by doing' pathway, and that is the Work-Learn Technical Diploma, issued by ITE.

16. Many ITE students aspire to progress to the polytechnics. However, to progress from ITE to polytechnic, you need to gain admission based on criteria set by polytechnics, which is mostly academic – meaning you need to score a certain GPA.

17. We therefore introduced the Early Admission Exercise to open up the gateway to students with strong interests or aptitudes in specific courses or skills. Many of you will make the cut to enter the polytechnics via good GPAs or through EAEs, but there will also be others who miss the academic bar, even though they may excel at their vocational skills and will benefit from further education and training.

18. The ITE Work-Learn Technical Diploma is different. It allows ITE graduates to apply for a diploma based on ITE's criteria, not the polytechnics'. This need not necessarily be purely academic criteria. It can be based on your portfolio if you are in a creative field, or employers' recommendation based on your work performance during industry attachment. In fact, ITE will put strong emphasis on employers' recommendations, which means it will favour ITE graduates who decide to work first, and perform well at their work. This method of admission will honour the 'learning by doing' mode of education that ITE champions and excels in.

19. For a start, ITE will offer four Technical Diplomas – in Mechanical and Electrical Services Supervision, Rehabilitation Care, Security Systems Engineering, and Marine and Offshore Engineering.

20. Unlike the traditional full-time diplomas offered by the polytechnics, these Work-Learn Technical Diplomas will incorporate rigorous on the job

training at their workplaces. We will need partner companies to develop a structured curriculum for on the job training, with mentors guiding the trainees. So it is a lot like an apprenticeship programme, and trainees will receive an income while learning.

21. Trainees will develop skills mastery through hands-on training and practice, grounded in deep knowledge of their employer's operations. With this experience and knowledge, they will be better placed to become masters in their trade, and rise through the ranks.

22. The Work-Learn Technical Diploma would not be possible without strong support from employers. I am very happy to see organisations like St Luke's Eldercare, AWWA, Certis CISCO, ST Electronics, Keppel Offshore & Marine, and Sembcorp Marine Ltd coming on board.

23. These employers will work closely with ITE even before the programmes begin. They are involved in the selection and hiring of trainees, with key company personnel involved in interviews. They will also play a big part in shaping the programme's curriculum. Over the course of the programme, they will work closely with the ITE trainers to guide and assess the trainees.

24. ITE plans to offer up to 120 places for their first intake in April 2018, and interested students can apply through ITE's website from 27th of November this year to the 2nd of February in 2018. This is only the first step. Depending on interest from students, there is scope to expand the scheme, in terms of the student intakes as well as the range of Technical Diplomas offered.

Conclusion

25. I wish you all the best as you begin the next chapter of your life, be it in the workplace, back to school, or a hybrid of the two. The paths ahead of you are varied, and you have choices. Find out more about each option, weigh the pros and cons, and make wise choices. More importantly, be a person of good character, who is a positive influence to the people around you.

26. Wherever life may take you, I encourage you to continue learning, and help others learn, throughout your journey.