

SPEECH BY DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER FOR FINANCE AND MINISTER FOR MANPOWER, MR THARMAN SHANMUGARATNAM, AT OPENING CEREMONY OF WORLDSKILLS SINGAPORE ON THURSDAY, 5 JULY 2012, AT 1000 HOURS, AT ITE COLLEGE WEST

Mr Bob Tan, Chairman, ITE Board of Governors

Mr Bruce Poh, Chief Executive Officer, ITE

Members of the ITE and Polytechnic Boards of Governors

Polytechnic Principals

My Parliamentary Colleagues several of whom are here today

Distinguished Guests

Industry Partners

Ladies and Gentlemen

Introduction

- 1 I am very happy to be here once again at the Opening of WorldSkills Singapore 2012. This is my second time at a WorldSkills Competition, and it is always a wonderful occasion to see our students spring their talents and skills on us in surprising ways.

Celebrating ‘My Talent’

- 2 The theme for this year’s WorldSkills Competition is a very interesting one. It simply says ‘*My Talent*’. This is a very apt theme because every child has a potential talent – it may be in a skill like design, or working with sophisticated tools like they have to do with aircraft repair. It may be in the service profession like nursing a patient back to health; or in the culinary arts. Or it could be in a sport or in painting or dance. Or it may be a talent of leading teams and inspiring others - amongst fellow students or at the workplace. **Whichever their potential talent, we have to help every Singaporean discover that strength in themselves, develop it, and take it as far as they can.**
- 3 And this is why we have been opening up many and different opportunities in our education system – **different opportunities for different potential talents**, but all of them operating **around a core of basic education** that all our students will experience.

We are developing many different pathways to excellence in different niches, in different areas of potential talent. We now have these pathways in many of our secondary schools, through the specialised schools, and through a diverse and vibrant post-secondary system comprising the ITEs, polytechnics and universities.

- 4 Each niche of excellence, or each course, has its own goals. But their basic aim is the same – to develop every student in a way that involves a solid core of basic skills and basic values, but also enables him or her to develop their own special strengths to the fullest.
- 5 This balance between what is a common core and what is diverse will have to be refined and updated from time to time. But it helps to know that we are doing something right. By most international comparisons, our students are making the most of a good education system. In the World Economic Forum’s latest Global Competitiveness Report 2011/2012, Singapore was ranked fourth in the world for its quality education system.

Vocational and Technical Education: Still Our Priority

- 6 Our ITE and polytechnics have played a key role in the success of our education system, and must remain our priority. Today, we have five polytechnics and two comprehensive ITE Colleges, with the third College to be ready in January 2013 to meet growing skilled manpower demands.
- 7 We are investing heavily and are continually upgrading our ITEs and polytechnics – not just their physical infrastructures, but their capacity to nurture new and better skills and the expertise that young Singaporeans need for the future. ITE College West is a good example. It has excellent facilities that many universities in Asia would aspire to have, as well as capable and experienced teachers, many with significant experience from industry. And it also has industry and social partners – critical to the success of our ITEs and polytechnics – who take in students on valuable internships, and also come into the ITE to ensure that their changing needs, whether in business or hospitals, are reflected in ITE’s training methods and courses.

- 8 Let me give just one example of the value of internships. One of ITE's pioneer students in the *Higher Nitec* in Marine & Offshore Technology a few years ago was a young Singaporean called Millar Morgan James. As part of his *Higher Nitec* course, he was attached to Keppel FELS. Morgan impressed his supervisors with his work attitude and willingness to learn. Keppel FELS shared that Morgan had displayed excellent fluency and accuracy in bringing what he learnt at ITE to his work. When he graduated in 2010, Morgan received a job offer from Keppel FELS. Two years on, he has risen to become a Charge-hand, a supervisory position overseeing his own team of workers. His employer has high hopes for him, a young Singaporean making his mark in a growing and highly competitive global industry.
- 9 Importantly too, we have built ladders between our different institutions – from the ITEs to the polytechnics, and to the universities. We are expanding those ladders. As some of you know, this includes expanding university opportunities for polytechnic students, so they can develop their skills up to the degree level and in fact, beyond the degree level.
- 10 Taken together, it helps ensure that every young Singaporean gains the skills and the confidence to earn a place in the labour market, to contribute to a high skilled, high productivity economy, and to have a fulfilling career.

Greater Integration of Pre- and Post-Employment Training

- 11 However, **no one can any longer stop at what they learnt in their teens or early 20s, in education.** That's pre-employment. What is now becoming very important is how we keep learning, throughout our careers. So we are giving much greater emphasis now to linking up and integrating pre-employment education with post-employment training.
- 12 Many countries are recognising the importance of this link between pre- and post-employment education and training. It is something we can and must do well in Singapore – giving every Singaporean not just a first-rate education before he or she starts working, but giving them opportunities to keep refreshing and upgrading their skills over the course of their careers. We have to anticipate this even when our

students are in the ITEs, polytechnics and universities. Anticipate that what they learn when they are young has to provide them with the foundation to be able to continue learning as they move along their careers.

- 13 A good example of how these links between pre- and post- employment training will be done is the Precision Engineering Vocational Continuing Education and Training initiative, or PEVC. It is the result of close collaboration between EDB, SPRING Singapore, Nanyang Polytechnic, ITE and our industry partners.¹ The PEVC provides a structured career pathway for our craftsmen to progress from ITE to specialised training within the precision engineering industry, and eventually to becoming recognised master craftsmen.
- 14 Under the PEVC, ITE offers a post-National Service (NS) refresher course. As the name suggests, it refreshes Singaporean male craftsmen in the skills that they need to enter the industry after doing their NS. They will then undergo systematic and specialised on-the-job training (OJT) programmes endorsed by ITE.
- 15 With some experience of working in the industry, craftsmen can then enrol in the new **Precision Engineering Master Craftsman programme** offered by Nanyang Polytechnic, which provides advanced vocational training and awards graduates with the WSQ Diploma and WSQ Specialist Diploma in Precision Engineering. So this is an example of how we integrate pre- and post-employment training. The ITE and polys working with industry partners to make sure there is no break between what you learn pre-employment and what you need to keep learning once you join the workforce.
- 16 This integrated pathway of pre- and post-employment training is of course not about training for training's sake. It is about **better career prospects and better wages**. It is about ensuring that our **industries can stay competitive**, by having employees with high and up-to-date skills. And it is about providing **opportunities for everyone to**

¹ The PEVC was announced by EDB and SPRING Singapore in December 2011. The PEVC costs \$52 million. It is an EDB and SPRING-led initiative, and a core manpower programme for the PE productivity roadmap tabled at NPCEC. Refer to <http://www.spring.gov.sg/NewsEvents/PR/2011/Pages/Singapore-to-Develop-Master-Craftsmen-to-Meet-the-Needs-of-Manufacturing-in-the-Future-20111213.aspx> for more details.

keep moving up through their own efforts, not just through their initial education, but by crossing bridges and ladders well after they start working. It's about social mobility, not just through the education system but well into our working lives.

Growing Interest in WorldSkills

- 17 I am really glad that WorldSkills Singapore continues to grow. The first WorldSkills Singapore Competition, held in 1994 had 54 finalists in eight skill areas. Today, it has grown to 162 finalists. I understand that this year, there will be 19 skill areas in the national competition, including one new area – Aircraft Maintenance. I am also glad that industry plays a strong role in the competition, by bringing in the experts to evaluate and assess the students.
- 18 The Competition however is more than about technical skills. It is a test of each student's mettle, self-discipline and confidence, and their ability to project and communicate what they are doing. The students learn to adapt, innovate and to stay on course, no matter what.
- 19 Shuner Leong is one such example. Shuner is the ITE graduate who bagged the inaugural Gold medal for Beauty Therapy in London last year. I understand that she was disheartened at the beginning of the international competition because all the other competitors looked so confident and so self-assured. Fortunately, she overcame self-doubt and fear, pulled herself together, and went on to clinch the Gold. Shuner is now back in ITE as a Teaching Associate. I'm sure she hopes to make a difference to her students, just like what her lecturers had done for her.
- 20 I was just asking our colleagues how many medals we won in last year's WorldSkills competition. I was told we won 4 gold medals, which is a good achievement for Singapore, a small country, having our young Singaporeans making it on the world stage in a variety of areas.

Conclusion

- 21 I am confident that WorldSkills Singapore 2012 will continue to groom more winners like Shuner, not just in medals, but winners in the game of proving to yourself that you can do something that is well beyond what you thought you could.
- 22 We must continue to inspire, motivate and encourage more of our youths to discover that strength and often initially hidden talent in themselves. Discover it, and take it far. Take it far in Singapore, and in the World.
- 23 Thank you.