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**Welcome Remarks by
SMU President Professor Arnoud De Meyer
at the SMU-SPD Conference on
“*Education for Inclusive Workspaces*”
Tuesday, 3 February 2015, 2pm
SMU Administration Building, Mochtar Riady Auditorium**

Guest of Honour, Ms Sim Ann, Minister of State for Education, and
Communications and Information;

Ms Chia Yong Yong, President of SPD;

Distinguished speakers and guests;

Ladies and gentlemen;

Good morning, and welcome to SMU.

We are proud to host today's conference, *Education for Inclusive Workspaces*. This is the second conference following last year's successful one jointly organised with SPD.

Last year, our theme focused on “Building a Culture of Inclusion within Institutes of Higher Learning”. This time, I'm very happy to say that we have gone one step further with our theme, “Education for Inclusive Workspaces”. We explore the role of education in helping to build a better world tomorrow, in connection with the working world. It is imperative that we champion thought leadership and also practices on Diversity & Inclusion, with invaluable ideas contributed by all sectors collaboratively.

In the highly interconnected and globalised world of today, diversity is not a theory or concept. It is our reality. However, we are also seeing more examples in the news where people who are different are rejected – often subtly, but sometimes, in ways that are inhumane, unjust or violent.

Inclusion is almost never a natural consequence of diversity. Inclusive attitudes require effort, and I believe that we all have a part to play in bridging communities and in championing a broader culture of openness and consciousness.

Students are the leaders of tomorrow who can influence and change the world, and carry on the mission of championing diversity and inclusion. But everyone has a role to play in shaping the world and organisational behaviour in the future. Success can only be achieved if we embrace diversity, and diversity is a key ingredient to success for any individual or organisation who wants to make a difference.

Here at SMU, diversity is built into our DNA. We have always been proud to be *Different*, and we see it as our mission to make a *Difference*.

Two years ago, I had set up a *Diversity & Inclusion* function, D&I – as we call it in short – at SMU. We are the first educational institution in Singapore to initiate a full D&I function in Singapore. The function goes beyond addressing "disability" and covers diversity in many other aspects for students, staff and faculty. In these past two years, we have made big strides in engaging both our own community, as well as the external community, in understanding what it means to welcome differences.

Last year, SMU introduced a rest and recovery space for students with disabilities. We know that our students spend an inordinate amount of time on campus with their studies, projects, and to hang around with their friends – and we know that this can create some challenges for students with certain types of disabilities. This room levels the playing field, so that everyone can participate in and experience the full breadth of a vibrant SMU campus life.

We've also revamped the university's disability support process. This new process makes it a lot easier for students to share their learning needs with the university,

and to receive support from their instructors and administrators in a way that is equitable, and preserves their dignity. We've adopted a broad approach and definition to disability, so that the support addresses individual needs. It also emphasises self-advocacy - students are encouraged to initiate and voice their needs.

Accessibility statements have been incorporated into course outlines, and we've been running workshops for faculty, staff and students to learn about disability – but more importantly, dialogue, and to reflect on their own experiences with power, privilege and prejudice. Some of these workshops were made possible because of our friendship with SPD.

This year, the university rolled out a *Diversity Leadership Development Programme* to nurture young diversity champions for our campus and the wider community. This programme is run with the support of the National Integration Council. Another course, *Diversity Management in Asia*, was also introduced as a core course, as part of our undergraduate curriculum review. For one of the class sessions, students will visit SPD, and chat with disability professionals about their work.

We also support and encourage student-led efforts, such as NOIS – N-O-I-S (which stands for “No One is Special”) – a student network that has been raising awareness on disability. This network welcomes anyone who's interested to learn and talk about disability. Many of the students in this group do not identify as disabled. They are allies, and they work to advocate for others. Recently, they partnered with the Singapore Association for the Deaf to run a basic sign language skills workshop, and to foster understanding on deaf identities, experiences and communities.

All of these efforts mark just the start of our journey, and we've got many more initiatives lined up. We push ourselves hard on this front for many reasons; chief among them:

1. To champion thought leadership for a world that welcomes the *Different*
2. To make a difference in creating a better environment for learning and work
3. To nurture future leaders, who can make bigger differences in time to come

Finally, I'd like to add that while universities are great spaces for ideas, experiments, experiences and exchanges, and we contribute generously to conversations, applications and adaptation require the input of professionals and practitioners. There is much that we can do, and want to do, but none of that will mean much if we don't have the support of business entities, social organisations, volunteers, the government, and society.

On that note, I'm heartened to see that we have a diverse mix of educators, organisations, social workers, students, members of the media, and public service officers today. I hope that you will participate actively, and share openly in the many conversations that will take place today.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank our Guest of Honour, Ms Sim Ann, for gracing this conference. I would also like to thank our friends at SPD for co-organising this conference together with SMU; our speakers, and to you all, for joining us today.

Thank you.

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