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Speech by Ms Chia Yong Yong, President of SPD, at the SMU-SPD Conference on "Education For Inclusive Workspaces", on Tuesday, 3 February 2015, 2 PM at The Singapore Management University

Ms Sim Ann,
Minister of State, Ministry of Communications and Information & Ministry of Education

Professor Arnoud De Meyer,
President of the Singapore Management University

Members of the SMU Diversity & Inclusion Committee

Distinguished speakers and guests

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good afternoon.

1. I'm very happy to be back at the Singapore Management University. The motivation to do more to give students with disabilities equal footing in tertiary education was what brought SPD and SMU together last February when we jointly organised the first of such conferences and signed a memorandum of understanding to explore how best we can support these students.

2. I'm encouraged to see the momentum for such efforts picking up over the last one year with more focus shed on the need for greater support for students with disabilities in tertiary institutions. We are happy to have found a valuable partner in SMU who shares our vision on inclusion. Through our collaboration with SMU, we had conducted disability awareness training for SMU Peer Helpers to equip them with the do's and don'ts of how to interact with persons with disabilities to enable them to carry out their volunteer duties more effectively. We also advised faculty staff and a visually-impaired student on using assistive technology and had discussions with the school's Career Office to provide career advice and employment support to students with disabilities graduating from their course. This collaboration has also paved the way for us to engage other tertiary institutions in bringing the message of inclusion and equal opportunities in higher education for persons with disabilities through awareness talks, roadshows and disability simulation exercises.
3. SMU has, on its part, done some good work in advocating for inclusion. Its Diversity and Inclusion team has been organising talks, workshops and seminars throughout the year to inculcate greater understanding of special needs individuals among its students and staff population. I'm told that there is now a room in the campus set up where individuals with disabilities can use for revision or to just to rest. I applaud SMU for walking the talk and getting down to creating a learning environment for people of all abilities.

4. Education for persons with disabilities has always been a main focus for SPD. Due to their constraints, education plays an even more crucial role in providing more career options for persons with disabilities. Education gives them the opportunity to be economically productive, which is important to their sense of dignity. For the past 30 years through the SPD Education Programme, we continued to focus on giving students with disabilities a level playing field in their educational pursuits and helping them cope in school - be it financially or emotionally. SPD also administers scholarships for Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation and Microsoft Singapore to help students with disabilities pursue higher education.
5. In the time that I'm with SPD, I have met many individuals with disabilities who, through sheer determination and hard work, made great strides in life. Among us this afternoon is one such individual who is also an SMU alumnus. Jeffrey Soh graduated from SMU in 2012 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He lost 90 per cent of his vision at 19 due to a medical mishap but persevered in his studies despite his acquired disability. Jeffrey kept a positive outlook and lived life to the fullest. He excelled in his studies and received a full scholarship from Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation which supported his undergraduate studies, and even became Singapore's first visually-impaired certified scuba diver. Today, this promising young man is a project manager at a global investment firm. You will meet him later this afternoon during the panel discussion.
6. With greater support and understanding from the community, students with disabilities like Jeffrey can receive better education and go on to become

financially independent and have better job prospects. I am glad that the Government has ramped up support for students with disabilities. The setting up of Disability Support Offices (DSOs) in all publicly funded tertiary institutions was great news for the sector last year. SPD has started engaging these DSOs and we hope that they will work more closely with us to play a bigger role in integrating students with disabilities into their campuses, like what SMU has done.

7. As a nation, more can be done to help students with disabilities adapt and integrate into their new learning environment. There is also the need to help them transit from tertiary education to the working world when they enter the mainstream workforce. This will involve educating employers on inclusive hiring and encouraging more firms to offer internships to students with disabilities, just to name a few.
8. There is a need for greater visibility and dialogue in society for public discourse on disability issues, and educational institutions can lead this space. This afternoon's conference brings together voices representing stakeholders that will help make learning and work spaces in Singapore truly inclusive.
9. I look forward to a fruitful conference and wish everyone a pleasant afternoon.
Thank you.