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## SPEECHES

July 26, 2017

### **Speech by Mr Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) at the Award Ceremony of the Singapore Teaching and Academic Research Talent Scheme (START), at Singapore Management University**

University Presidents, Provosts, Principals

Colleagues, Parents, and Award Recipients

Ladies and Gentlemen

#### **INTRODUCTION**

1. Thank you for being here with us and I would like to thank SMU for hosting this year's awards ceremony. This is the third year that we are conferring the Singapore Teaching and Academic Research Talent Scheme (START) awards.
2. Nurturing someone for an academic career is a long and intensive process. But I am pleased to learn that one of our past recipients, Dr Nala Lee, has already started working with NUS as an Assistant Professor for Linguistics this year. She teaches typology, which is the study of the structural and functional features of language.
3. So the trees that we have so painstakingly planted over the years have started to bear fruit. We are expecting more to join the academic workforce next year, and I look forward to their contributions in our universities.
4. I am also pleased to share that this year, we have a bumper crop of 38 award recipients - the largest number of START awardees since its inauguration, up from about 20 per year in the first two years. I hope this signifies something deeper – which is growing interest amongst young Singaporeans to choose academia as a career, knowing that it is a career that can make an impactful difference to the society and the world.

#### **GLOBAL INSTITUTIONS WITH A STRONG LOCAL CORE**

5. Some may ask: given that our universities are globally competitive, with access to top talent around the world, why do we place so much emphasis on grooming Singaporean academics? Indeed, Singapore has benefitted from many foreign academics and researchers that have contributed immensely to our development. A few have been even conferred honorary citizenships.
6. But the prerequisite for our universities to be successful and internationally competitive is that we have a strong local core of academics. No organizations – even MNCs – can be entirely global. Every successful organization has a home, an origin, a history, a coming of age journey that defines its values and heritage and which its people can strongly identify with. In the same way as a successful graduate is grateful to his alma mater, a successful global

company remembers its origins and continues to contribute to and draw strengths from its home base. And so should our autonomous universities.

7. And a large part of the work our universities do must be pertinent to your home base. In a small city like Singapore, all our autonomous universities are national universities, with important national objectives to fulfil. The first key objective is to provide high quality education to Singaporeans – to produce talent not just with skills and knowledge to do a job, but with lifelong critical thinking and learning to learn skills. The second is to extend education of students into lifelong learning for our working population. The third is to produce research that has a real and significant, and from time to time even transformative impact on our society, economy and way of life. These are not mutually exclusive objectives.

8. A local core of faculty in our autonomous universities, is one that can instinctively connect to the key missions and objectives of our autonomous universities. Because they understand Singapore's challenges and problems, and will feel particularly strongly about finding the answers and solutions to them. Their teaching, their research, are driven by this strong and dedicated sense of purpose.

9. I met Professor Issac Ben-Israel recently at the Research Innovation and Enterprise Council meeting recently. Every time he speaks, you can feel that whatever he does as an academic, is driven by a strong conviction to help his country tackle its unique challenges.

10. I believe our universities will further enhance their international reputation and garner respect from the world, by discharging their national objectives well. This is how Singapore becomes internationally respected too - not just because we are a global city, but because we could address our own challenges and problems well. Because of this, others found it useful to study our philosophies, methods and approaches. Having built our international credibility, we were able to attract and tap on the knowledge and expertise of talents around the world, to further contribute to our development. This would not have been possible if we had not first built up some local expertise, to tackle our challenges. So, we always start from home.

## **THE TRAILBLAZERS BEFORE THE AWARDEES**

11. For our awardees, if you are overwhelmed by the expectations, you do not need to worry. Many other Singaporean academics before you have done us proud and contributed to Singapore through their work.

12. Take for example, Associate Professor Lok Shee-Mei and her team from Duke-NUS Medical School, who were the first in the world to map the structure of the Zika virus, demonstrating that the virus was more durable than the dengue virus. This crucial research finding allowed other scientists in the world to develop antibodies and drugs that target the Zika virus.

13. From SMU, Associate Professor Tan Hwee Pink who collaborated with A\*STAR and our providers of aged care to help keep track of elderly who are living alone. The sensors installed in these homes enable the caregivers to detect any unusual living patterns and be alerted if the elderly need any assistance. Professor Tan was awarded "The Most Outstanding Contribution to Social Behavioural Research to Enable Sustainable Ageing in Place in the World in 2016" during the Global Awards 2016 organised by The Globals, a worldwide publisher specialising in aged care provision.

14. There is also Associate Professor Yeo Kang Shua from SUTD who led the conservation and restoration project of Yueh Hai Ching (粤海清) Temple at Philip Street from 2009 to 2014. This is Singapore's own temple of love. This project is a significant effort in the research into our social and architectural history. And it was awarded the Conservation Award of Merit under the 2014 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation.

15. Lastly, from NTU, we remember the contributions of the late Professor Lee Sing Kong. Professor Lee was a true believer that quality teaching was the key to improve student learning outcomes, and dedicated his life to advance his belief. He worked with MOE and our schools to transform teacher training to develop teachers with values, skills and knowledge to function in the 21st century classroom. After Professor Lee stepped down as Director NIE in 2014, he continued to be closely involved in teaching at the tertiary level. He led the development of NTU's innovation in teaching methods and curriculum, including the adoption of Technology Enabled Learning and research into best teaching and learning practices for Singapore's tertiary education sector. Professor Lee's contribution to teaching was invaluable.

And one of the reasons why Singapore's education system is so well regarded all over the world, is partly because of Sing Kong's work.

16. Beyond those who have contributed in teaching and research, several academics took on leadership positions in the autonomous universities, and shaped our universities into what they are today. They include Professor Shih Choon Fong, Professor Lim Pin, Professor Cheong Hee Kiat, Professor Tsui Kai Chong, Professor Tan Chorh Chuan, and Professor Tan Chin Tiong. Others, such as Professor Tommy Koh, Professor Chan Heng Chee, Professor Jayakumar and Associate Professor Yaacob Ibrahim, entered public service and contributed to the success of Singapore outside of academia.

## CONCLUSION

17. Our autonomous universities have performed well in global rankings of universities. These global rankings provide us a useful reference of how well our universities are regarded in research, reputation among employers, fellow academics when compared to other universities overseas. But global rankings are neither adequate nor fully reflective of the priorities of our autonomous universities and their economic and social mission.

18. I am confident that the leadership of our autonomous universities fully appreciates this, and joins me in underscoring the importance of developing a strong local core, in order for our universities to fulfil their missions.

19. To all the recipients of the START Awards tonight – I hope I have given you a sense of how important your development is to Singapore and our higher education system. I wish you a career as varied and fulfilling as so many of your predecessors. Congratulations and all the best in your academic journey.

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Last updated: 02 Aug 2017