

**SPEECH BY SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE, MS INDRANEE RAJAH
AT PRIVATE EDUCATION CONFERENCE 2013, 9 APR 2013**

Theme of Conference: Raising the Bar on Quality

Mr Brandon Lee, Chief Executive Officer, Council for Private Education

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

INTRODUCTION

1. A very good morning to all of you. It is my pleasure to join you today at this inaugural conference. I would like to thank all our panellists and guests for taking time from your busy schedules to be present, and to the Council for Private Education for organising this event.

PROGRESS MADE IN RAISING STANDARDS IN THE SECTOR

2. When the Private Education Act was introduced three years ago, it was a particularly challenging time for the sector. At the time, the sector had experienced a few years of rapid expansion with a large growth in student enrolment. The lack of a strong regulatory framework to accompany this rapid growth had allowed the entry of some fly-by-night operators into the sector. The proliferation of unscrupulous practices and sudden school closures threatened to bring the entire sector into disrepute.
3. The Government had to act to protect the interests of students, and safeguard Singapore's reputation in education. We had three objectives:
 - a. First, to ensure a basic level of protection for students, including the safeguarding of course fees;
 - b. Second, to raise the quality of providers to meet a minimum standard in their academic processes and corporate governance; and
 - c. Third, to improve access by consumers to information on providers and courses.
4. I am glad to note that the sector has now achieved a baseline standard in all three areas. You will hear more about this progress and the latest state of the sector in the next address by Mr Brandon Lee. These improvements were not come by easily. They are the result of the combined efforts of the Council, and industry. Thank you all for your hard work thus far.

RAISING QUALITY IN THE SECTOR

5. As we move into the fourth year of the new regulatory regime, what can the industry expect? What is the long-term direction? We have made much progress, and the private education sector today is quite different from what it was three years ago. But, as you may have deduced from the theme of this conference, we need to build on the foundation that has been laid over the past few years and do more. I would like to share today three points on how we can make a real and sustained difference to quality in the sector.

Expanding our measures of quality to include student outcomes

6. The first point relates to our measures of quality for the sector. Our regulatory framework currently centres on quality of governance and processes. The Council will work with the industry to ensure that the threshold standards that have been achieved do not slip. We will also fine-tune the regulations to increase their effectiveness, while being mindful to avoid imposing an unnecessary burden on institutions.
7. But beyond ensuring quality governance and processes among private education providers, real quality improvements in the sector can only be achieved if we start looking at the performance of providers in terms of student outcomes. What knowledge and skills have graduates of private education institutions gained through their studies? How satisfied are they with the education received, and did they meet their goals for enrolling in these courses? Without the answers to such questions, there is insufficient basis for us to ascertain the true quality of private education, and to identify areas for improvement.
8. For these reasons, we would like, eventually, to see private education institutions demonstrate the ability to attain positive student outcomes. I say “eventually”, as this will not be an easy task and will take time to achieve. There are several issues that we will first need to resolve. For example, there is currently no clear consensus on the desired outcomes from private education. Are institutions responsible only for ensuring that their students successfully complete their programmes, or should they also be held accountable for the employment outcomes of their graduates? Even if we reach a consensus on the outcome measures to be used, whether and how such measures could be incorporated into our regulatory framework will also require further consultation with the industry, employers and other stakeholders.
9. So there is still a lot more work that needs to be done. But I hope that all of you who are here representing private education institutions will start considering how you might measure outcomes for your students, and use these as the basis to spur quality improvements in your programmes.

Prioritising the interest of students in private education provision

10. The second point I would like to make is that the interest of students should be the priority of all educational institutions. There is a limit to what can be prescribed through regulation. We believe that improvements to the sector can only be sustained if the institutions place the interests of students at the heart of all that they do.
11. A recent report¹ on the for-profit higher education industry in the United States illustrates how a purely profit motive can lead to severe repercussions for students and the industry. The report, a result of a two-year investigation on for-profit colleges by a US Senate Committee, highlighted high dropout rates, high fees that were not commensurate with returns to students, lack of student support, and misleading marketing on the success of graduates. Such practices were clearly aimed at growing student enrolment and revenue, with little regard for the welfare of students. Although not all institutions were guilty of the same practices, the widely-publicised report has damaged the credibility of the entire sector in the US.
12. We hope that for private education institutions in Singapore, educational responsibilities will take primacy over other goals. While institutions can justifiably seek to increase enrolment, they should ensure that students they admit are able to benefit from their programmes, and provide appropriate support to help students complete their studies. As we continue to strengthen consumer education, prospective students will also be more discerning of institutions with good educational practices. Institutions that are not student-centric will lose out in the longer term to those who are.

Increasing industry involvement in self-regulation and development of the sector

13. Finally, I would like to encourage the industry to initiate and lead efforts that can contribute towards raising quality in the sector.
14. Industry players are well-placed to understand the latest sectoral trends, and review current practices. They can complement the role of Government in regulation by developing industry guidelines that work in parallel with legislative requirements. Such guidelines can be evolved rapidly to respond to industry feedback, contributing towards a more flexible regulatory environment for institutions in the longer term.
15. Industry can also play a key role in building capability for the sector. Existing efforts, such as the launch of a Specialist Diploma in Applied Teaching and

¹ 'For Profit Higher Education: The Failure to Safeguard the Federal Investment and Ensure Student Success' was released by the United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labour and Pensions 30 July 2012.

Learning offered by Republic Polytechnic to address a gap in pedagogical training, have thus far been led by the Council. I note that the newly-formed Singapore Association for Private Education is embarking on joint initiatives with the Council to uplift capabilities. We are optimistic that such collaborations between industry and Government will play an increasingly important role.

CONCLUSION

16. This inaugural conference is a first step in bringing together key stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of the quality imperative for the sector.
17. The business of education involves the shaping of lives and the promise of a chance for individuals to fulfil their aspirations. We know that many students take up private education with the hope of advancing their prospects for further studies or their careers. We need all of you from the private education institutions to recognise the impact that you have on your students' lives, and to deliver on the promises you have made. The duty you have to your students must go beyond purely contractual obligations, especially given the significant investment of time and money that many of your students make in pursuing the educational offerings that you provide. On its part, the Council will continue its efforts in raising the quality of the private education sector and its institutions.
18. Thank you very much for the opportunity to be here, and the commitment that you have shown in being here. I wish you a fruitful conference.