SPEECH BY PROF HONG HAI, DEAN, NANYANG BUSINESS SCHOOL, NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY ON THE OCCASION OF THE NETWORKING NIGHT ON 13 OCTOBER 2004

Partners and representatives from the Big 4, and colleagues from the Nanyang Business School and final year Bachelor of Accountancy students:

I am delighted to see so many of you here tonight and especially pleased to note that the Big 4 accounting firms are here in full force. A special welcome back to our alumni who are currently carving out successful careers at the Big 4.

The Bachelor of Accountancy programme at NTU has some 50 years of illustrious history behind it. Over this period of time, our graduates have not only taken up senior positions in the Big 4, but also filled the ranks of CEOs, CFOs and other top management positions in business and government.

The quality of students who come into our programmes has continued to go up. I recall that thirty to forty years ago, the best students in Singapore went into engineering and medicine. Today, a very large percentage of the brightest and ablest are in accountancy. The academic scores of our accountancy intake each year ranks among the top two among those of schools in NTU. What has brought about this dramatic change?

The answer lies partly in the way accountancy graduates now fit into the work force. In the old days, in a newly industrializing economy, premium was placed on engineers whose training in analytical thinking made them suitable for jobs not only in factories and industrial roles, but also as leaders in business and government. We see that very clearly in China of today, where engineering graduates of Tsinghua and Jiaotong universities fill the top echelons of government and industry -- Jiang Zeming was from Jiaotong, Hu Jintao and Zhu Rongji from Tsinghua, all engineers.

But as the nature of the economy changed in Singapore, other skills become more important. A wider education base, with the ability to integrate knowledge from different disciplines, to think out of the box, and to find creative solutions to problems have become more important than grasp of pure facts and technicalities. The accountancy programme at NTU has likewise changed, and changed in a way that has made our programme a leader in education innovation in this part of the world. Our programme now not only produces accountants that are technically...
competent, but have also been educated to think, to create, and to adapt. The programme now produces accountants that fit in accountancy firms but can also grow into top consultants or move into successful general management careers.

5 years ago, we started a important collaboration with the Accounting programme at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to embark on a radically different way to train accountants. Illinois has been ranked as the top accounting programme in the US for the last 20 consecutive years. This collaboration, known as "Project Discovery", is the only one of its kind that the University of Illinois has embarked on with universities in the region. This has come about because U of I knows our faculty well, and have viewed favourably the balanced mix in NBS of professors who are strong in research and those who are experienced or well networked with practice in accountancy.

In "Project Discovery", the focus is on learning through discovery, or what we call "action learning". Students undertake many real-world projects and gain valuable hands-on experience in the process. Instead of a lecture-tutorial format, we use a seminar format for teaching. The professor takes on more the role of a facilitator rather than a lecturer. There is a greater emphasis on student presentations and class participation. This helps to build up students’ communications skills and their ability to think on their feet. Often, they will be asked to analyze complex problems, review the information available, then take a position and defend it. There are often no right or wrong answers – students were initially uncomfortable with this, but they gradually learn to realize that in real life many decisions are of this nature.

The curriculum has also been restructured to be more integrative. No longer are subjects taught in their individual "silos". Connections between different accounting subject areas are made, and we take it one step further by integrating various disciplines such as economics, finance, strategy, psychology and systems thinking into accounting subjects. These changes are necessary given the increasing complexity of business and the need for more rigorous corporate governance in business. There is particular emphasis on ethics and professional integrity, and students are challenged to deal with ethical dilemmas in real business situations.

The role of the accountant has evolved from the traditional transaction processing to that of risk assessment, decision support and strategic planning. We cannot afford to, and we no longer produce bean counters: our graduates must be accountants that are strategic thinkers and innovative problem solvers.

We have just graduated the first batch of B. Acc students who went through the whole Project Discovery process and pedagogy in their 3 years with us, we are confident that employers like yourself from the Big 4 will be able to see the positive differences from earlier batches. We look forward to receiving your feedback.

Several major universities in Australasia and Asia have noticed our innovative curriculum and pedagogy. In August, National Taiwan University and Tzuchi universities sent a contingent of professors to study our methods; next January, faculty from top-rated Macquarie University will be spending time with us.

The Big 4 have traditionally hired the majority of our graduates. This year there been a jump in the numbers – I understand that you are looking for 540 of our graduates, an increase of more than 20% over last year. I hope we can cope with the demand.

As a school, Nanyang Business School has been receiving greater recognition in regional rankings. The London Economist and Asia Inc recently placed us first and second in Southeast Asia, and top 5 in Asia for the MBA. This is an endorsement of the quality of our faculty and programmes. Likewise, we have also received recognition from full European quality or EQUIS accreditation - the only business school in Singapore to do so. Our executive masters programme in China are among the most sought after today. Tomorrow, we shall be announcing a major
breakthrough that brings us into close collaboration with one of China's important ministries to provide MBA education for their senior managers.

Thank you once again for your presence this evening and we all look forward to an excellent evening of networking.