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**Speech by the Hon Mrs Selina Chow Liang Shuk-ye, GBS, JP  
Motion Debate on Associate Degree, 12 June 2002**

Selina Chow:

Madam President, having listened to the speeches made by a number of Honourable colleagues, I believe a core issue has to be clarified in this debate today. Are we discussing here the question of whether or not education opportunities should be provided, or the question of how public resources can be suitably allocated while providing education opportunities at the same time?

Regardless of where their seats are located in this Chamber, Members will all agree that the strong consensus of this Council is that there must be investments in education. In this connection, however, I feel that Members probably have divergent views on the question of whether or not such investments should be made by the Government alone. So, this is the first point. The Liberal Party supports the policy on offering associate degree programmes because we believe that this policy can provide youths interested in pursuing further studies with an additional opening. That having been said, we must say we do not think the costs for such a policy should be borne fully by the Government or taxpayers. Are we saying that the Government does not have to play any role in this respect? Not really! The Government's responsibility is to ensure the quality of associate degrees, and that other aspects like the qualifications of teaching staff, programme structure, and so on, are up to a certain standard. Hence, the Government does have a very important role to play in this context, only that it is not the one playing all the roles involved. As Members have mentioned earlier on, many local private providers or private providers run by overseas tertiary institutions will also offer such programmes in Hong Kong. That being the case, how should the responsibilities of education provision be shared by all parties concerned? Who should be responsible for supplying the resources required (or who should be responsible for footing the bill)? Should the costs involved be borne by the taxpayers, the youths enrolled on such programmes or their parents?

Apart from that, we have also heard Honourable colleagues (particularly Members representing the labour sector, albeit they are not the only ones who say that) mention a very shocking statement made by Prof POON Chung-kwong. According to these Members, Prof POON Chung-kwong said, to this effect, "If no funding support should be provided for the institutions offering the existing associate degree programmes, these institutions might have to resort to layoffs." Certainly, nobody would wish to see that The Polytechnic University of Hong Kong has to lay off 800 employees all of a sudden. However, if offering associate degree

programmes is a desirable policy, the associate degrees should be able to command recognition and support in the market. Otherwise, why should such associate degree programmes be offered? Just nobody would wish to enrol on such programmes. If these associate degree programmes can receive recognition, the market will gradually prove that such programmes merit support.

The Liberal Party pointed out a very long time ago that we would support this policy if the various associate degree programmes should operate on a self-financing basis. Moreover, since diploma and higher diploma programmes are pre-vocational training courses, we do not support reducing the funding support for such programmes. And since the amendment moved by Mr CHEUNG Man-kwong urges the Government to not withdraw or reduce the funding support for associate degree programmes, which is a point we do not agree, we cannot give it our support. But then, we do agree with the point raised in the amendment in respect of programmes comparable to associate degree programmes (I am not sure whether the comparable programmes refer to diploma and higher diploma programmes). On the whole, since we do not agree with his objection to the withdrawal of or any reduction in the funding support for associate degree programmes, we cannot support Mr CHEUNG's amendment. If we agree to his amendment, we will be breaching our belief that the tuition fees of associate degree programmes should be shared by the parties concerned in the light of the market needs, and the choice of the students and their parents. For these reasons, we cannot support Mr CHEUNG's amendment.

I should also like to point out (the Honourable James TIEN has already made that very clear earlier on) that the Liberal Party actually attaches great importance to education and agrees that education is an important social investment. However, we hope that when we debate the motion to be moved by Mr YEUNG Yiu-chung on the next occasion, we can debate the issue of higher education from a more macro point of view and look more detailedly into other relevant issues as well. Even though the subject of our debate today is only associate degree, we should still look at the overall allocation of public resources from a macro point of view, so as to find out how public resources can be suitably allocated to give real play to their cost-effectiveness. Certainly, some Honourable colleagues may question why we have to talk about such practical issue as cost-effectiveness of resources when we are discussing education. I believe this is an issue any society must consider in this context, bearing in mind that the resources we have are not unlimited. Given that we have to work with limited resources, we have to make some selection decisions. In my view, while the Government should provide quality or up-to-standard education, it should not be held responsible for everything. The Government just cannot afford to offer substantial funding support for every policy or waive all fees and charges. I believe this policy, which is also a world trend, is currently being implemented step by step in the field of school education, and that the same policy will also be applied to tertiary education gradually.

Thank you, Madam President.