

Matriculation, 30 August 2013 at the University of Copenhagen.

Speech by rector Ralf Hemmingsen.

Dear new students.

Welcome to the University of Copenhagen.

I sometimes wonder:

what is the face of Denmark in the outside world?

After all, the image of Denmark - and Copenhagen –
can perhaps explain why you are here today
– along with of course the name and reputation of the university.

Is the face of Denmark the stars of academia:

Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard who would have turned 200 this year.

Or perhaps the physicist Niels Bohr who presented his model of the atom 100 years ago?

Or is it Detective Sarah Lund from the Danish television hit "The Killing"?

The heroine who always wears a special sweater and always solves the murder mystery?

Or rather, is it this year's Danish winner of the Eurovision Song Contest.

The singer with the English-sounding name Emmilie de Forest.

I would like to think that it is Kierkegaard and Bohr - and not Eurovision.

But I am afraid the stars of the university have rarely been blockbusters on prime time television.

But although 130 million people watched Emmilie de Forest bring the Eurovision trophy back to Denmark

and a big number of British grandmothers were asked to knit a Sarah Lund sweater for Christmas,
I don't think they are the faces of Denmark either.

As a psychiatrist, I would claim that we have to dig deeper into our childhood memories.

And there it is - the face of Denmark!

LEGO - small LEGO figures - made by the Danish company.

A huge army of 4 billion figures - not far from the world human population - have invaded minds across the globe since 1978.

More than 430 million people have played with them.

And they come in many different shapes

-from caveman to crazy scientist.

Well, I am not suggesting that there is such a thing as a national character.

And if there was, it surely cannot be carved into a plastic toy.

After all, the Barbie doll is not a mirror of the American soul just because it is produced by an American company, Mattel.

Nonetheless, LEGO does reflect some positive qualities:

An intelligent toy which stimulates your imagination and ability to construct your own world.

But in June this year, a scientific study went around the world and produced rather disturbing headlines across the media landscape:

"LEGO faces are becoming more angry"

was the sound bite in the Guardian, Huffington Post and CNN.

A researcher from The University of Canterbury in New Zealand had analysed the facial expressions of some 3.600 Lego figures

before he reached this conclusion.

My first impression was that the researcher from New Zealand got it all wrong. Perhaps the explanation was that his perspective is from the other side of the world where smiling faces are seen upside down?

In any case, I want to prove him wrong.

I think it is essential that the face of the university is welcoming and open to international students and researchers.

And that is indeed the whole purpose of this ceremony.

Today you are officially registered as citizens in the university republic.

And we have every reason to be cheerful.

While I have been speaking, you may have wondered:

Who on earth are the smiling people standing there in front of you?

Well, they are the university heads – the management.

And it is custom for students to cheer when I call the dean of your faculty.

But you are also very welcome to cheer for the others

– in keeping with the spirit of the university as one big community.

From the left, we have:

Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation, Thomas Bjørnholm

Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education, Lykke Friis

Dean at the Faculty of Theology, Kirsten Busch Nielsen.

Dean at the Faculty of Law, Henrik Dam

Dean at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Troels Østergaard Sørensen

Dean at the Faculty of Health Sciences, Ulla Wewer

Dean at the Faculty of Humanities, Ulf Hedetoft

Dean at the Faculty of Science, John Renner Hansen

And at the far right, University Director Jørgen Honoré.

The Lego study from New Zealand doesn't explain why Lego figures have become more angry.

But perhaps the present economic crisis has an impact.

The western world is faced with the worst crisis since the depression in the 1930s and it may be that this atmosphere of crisis has been reflected in the work of Danish toy designers.

It certainly is true that the prospects for many young people are pretty miserable at the moment.

Young Spanish people are looking for jobs in South America
– and not the other way around.

And student protesters occupy their own university in Berkeley and Madison and fill the streets of London and Montreal as tuition fee is on the rise.

But it is also a social and moral crisis.

When The Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts no longer supports "unpatriotic" art. And Nobel Prize winner, the Hungarian author Imre Kertész is considered un-Hungarian because of his Jewish legacy and international outlook.

When Romas are beaten up in public

– not only in rural Slovakia, but also in the center of Copenhagen.

In this economic and moral crisis, I think the university plays a vital role.

In this world,

the idea of international education,

the flow of students and researchers across borders and continents,

and the intercultural understanding which arises from education across borders is needed more than ever.

Indeed, as Mark Twain has said:

Travelling can be fatal.

(pause)

Fatal to ignorance and narrow-mindedness.

Therefore, I am pleased to tell you today that the University of Copenhagen is actively pursuing this sense of being open to the outside world.

The flow of international students have more than doubled over the last decade.

And the number of international researchers has tripled over the last five years.

Now, the University is the workplace in Denmark with the highest number of skilled internationals – more than Lego, Novo Nordisk and other multinational Danish companies.

But what can you expect from the university

-apart from a smiling dean and a welcoming attitude?

I would like to stress three things.

First, we are keen on quality.

We are constantly trying to improve the sheer value of our study programmes.

I am not sure you can trust the quality of university rankings,

but on the latest list from Shanghai, we are ranked 42 in the world and 9 in Europe.

Perhaps I should also refer to a more reliable source:

our international students tend to rate our study programmes pretty high.

Second, we are essentially a research university.

The only thing we know for sure is that we don't know anything for sure.

96 percent of the matter and energy in the universe is still completely unknown.

And every year, thousands of new animals and plants are discovered.

Most of them are tiny insects,

but last year scientist found a new monkey species in Congo,

the first monkey discovered in 28 years.

My message is this: knowledge changes the world and being a student at the university is being part of this revolutionary spirit.

Just like 100 years ago, when professor Niels Bohr presented his model of the atom.

The last thing which – perhaps - makes the University of Copenhagen stand out is the learning culture.

We like to think that we encourage independent thinking.

We like to think that the relationship between professor and student is informal.

So don't expect just to digest knowledge (without chewing on it) and repeat it at exams – word by word.

Expect that you are welcome to engage in discussions.

make presentations,

make up your own mind .

Finally, I would like to mention what we are trying to do to make you feel more welcome.

You can become a member of our alumni association KUBULUS.

This will give you a great network of current and former students at this university.

You can also join one of our many other associations:

The Erasmus Student Network

University Sports

The Student House where you can even try to work at the international café

Practice your political skills at the Student Council

Or join one of the many music groups.

We also encourage you to join one of the programmes which will improve your job prospects in this world of worried Lego-faces.

Our alumni association Kubulus organises job fairs where students can meet their potential employers.

We offer mentoring programmes where you can get experience from a professional in your field of study.

And we offer entrepreneurship courses which serve to motivate and equip students to start their own business.

Before you leave, custom is that the new students give rector a symbolic handshake. By doing so, you promise that you will obey the University laws from 1479.

The laws are mostly about all the power the professors have over their students and how misbehaving students will be thrown in prison.

Luckily that is one tradition we have not kept...

Therefore I suggest we add something to the handshake.

I hope we can shake hands
on the importance of the university in this present economic and moral crisis.
On the idea of international education.
And that you will smile when you think about your time at the University of
Copenhagen.

Welcome!