

Speech at Consortium for Global Talent's meeting 15 May 2013.

By Prorector Thomas Bjørnholm.

Dear Ambassadors and embassy representatives, Dear fellow researchers and educators, Welcome to the University of Copenhagen and today's event "Bridging Cultures".

Last month, I visited another culture – Singapore – and I had the pleasure of meeting Professor Kishore Mahbubani. He introduced me to the G - P - S. Not the system most of us use in our cars – but,

- Good news
- Problems
- and Solutions

The good news is that the world is in many ways doing better than ever before. Statistically,

- fewer people are killed in wars,
- middle classes grow and there is less poverty
- and we see more NGO contacts across national boundaries as well as more education worldwide.

And in the face of global challenges, we develop the same hopes and dreams for the future. Speaking generally, we become more and more alike.

And it is also good news for universities, since they have laid the foundation for the positive development towards knowledge-based societies. But there are problems too

One of them is of course the before-mentioned global challenges. We are to a much larger degree than before affected by the same bad global conditions:

- climate change
- nuclear weapons
- pandemics
- and financial bubbles and crises.

We are in the same boat, so to speak.

But that poses another problem. Because we do not have the same captain.

Meaning, we don't have the political set-up to meet these challenges. Imagine that nations in the past were individual boats and ships sailing independently with each their own captain.

Compared to that, the entire world's population is now in the same boat. But each nation still has its own captain. And instead of gathering on the bridge, all the captains stay in their cabins.

Mahbubani's solution is to get all the captains out of their cabins, on to the same bridge and strive towards a global joint effort (or command) so we can cooperate on meeting the shared challenges.

Steer the same course, so to speak. And to do that, different cultures, for example the the East and the West need to understand and respect each other.

As Mahbubani puts it: 88 % of the world's population lives in the East. Yet in the West, we hold on to the power as best we can.

What students are taught in the universities is in large founded in Western culture and history.

And the West considers itself the dominant political power – think just of the West holding 60% of the permanent seats in the UN Security Council.

As such, Mahbubani's argues that our global governance system is outdated, and we need to fix it.

And the way to do it is to

- raise awareness,
- raise education
- and secure understanding – for example between the East and the West in order to be able to stand on the same bridge when making decisions that affect the world

As a university leader, I was inspired by Mahbubani's thoughts. I was happy to note that the universities have played a vital role in improving the world

- o by educating people,
- o by promoting debate and critical thinking rather than violent solutions
- o and by contributing with research results to overcome challenges.

But I was also happy that the universities are still very much needed.

Because the challenges we face today are different, and we need research to match that. There are still many people in the world who lack education. And debate and critical thinking is crucial if we want to bridge the East and the West.

And I see the universities play a major role in that process. Here, at the University of Copenhagen, we have already launched an Asian Dynamics Initiative, coordinating the many research and teaching activities related to Asia. To grasp the "Asian dynamics", we must understand and learn from Asia. And that includes everything from languages and different cultural aspects to politics and economics. Mahbubani's focus is on the East-West link, but we might as well consider the North-South link.

So in the same way, our students and researchers in other fields work hard to expand their own and society's understanding of and ability to interact with other cultures in the world – be it in Europe, Africa, Australia or the Americas.

In short, universities bridge cultures! They have changed the world for the better – and they keep doing it!

It is often said that universities and countries compete in a global "brain race". But the term "brain race" is not a good one. Not just because it bears connotations of the "arms race" or the "space race" during the Cold War. But also because it indicates that students and researchers act like foes rather than friends.

Instead of "brain race", we should talk about "brain circulation" where researchers and students

- work together
- go back and forth between countries
- and bridge cultures to our mutual benefit.

This is the philosophy we strive towards at the University of Copenhagen. And this is what today's event is about.

So I encourage you all to shake the hand of at least 3 people of different nationalities before you leave tonight. And as such take part in bridging cultures. Now I will give the floor to Mayor of Culture and Leisure in Copenhagen, Ms Pia Allerslev.