Hong Kong University Centenary Keynote Address
Presidents' Summit
East Meets West: Synergy, Competition and Collaboration
Saturday, December 18, 2011

Vice-Chancellor Tsui [*Vice-Chancellor and President, HKU*], students, staff, faculty, and alumni of Hong Kong University, esteemed colleagues, friends: it is an honour to join you in celebrating Hong Kong University's Centenary. Congratulations, and thank you!

Those of us speaking today were asked to address the topic, "East Meets West: Synergy, Competition, and Collaboration." I've decided I want to focus my remarks today on the word in that phrase that *seems* to be the least important: the word "meets." And so, let me begin with a story ….

A man sits in the dark on the top deck of a very large ship, all of the northern constellations visible above him in an almost black sky. It's "bar night" on board, and around him, people are laughing and singing, but the man is in a meditative mood and so he sits at a distance, alone. He hears a small, almost imperceptible sound, and glances down at the drink in his hand just in time to see the ice-cube in it crack. The ice-cube was chipped off an iceberg earlier in the day, and now it releases molecules that had been locked inside a glacier since before modern man appeared on Earth.

The person in my story is Michael Byers, Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law at The University of British Columbia. At the

time of our story, he is situated on Pond Inlet, at the northern end of Baffin Island, in the Arctic, and he's traveling aboard the Canadian Coast Guard ship *Amundsen*. The Amundsen is an icebreaker and Professor Byers and his fellow passengers are researchers travelling through the Artctic to measure the environment and the effects of climate change.

As I followed Professor Byers's progress through the Arctic this past summer, I thought about how the icebreaker is a metaphor for the university: a place unto itself but connected to the wider world; a place of study and research; a place of collaboration and cohabitation; *a safe place for significant conversations about sensitive issues, among people of profound difference*.

In North America, an "icebreaker" is not *only* a vessel for creating a way forward where there was none before. We also use that word to describe a joke or game used to help people who don't know each other relax and open up. A third definition of "icebreaker" is a beginning, a start.

A university should be the place where students, staff, faculty, and alumni begin to discover both the common humanity and the deep difference between them, and where it's safe enough to explore the discomfort and the vulnerability inherent in such encounters. It should be the place where open, authentic engagement with people whose appearance or customs or worldviews are different from ours becomes an habitual practice.

The 20th-century Polish journalist and poet, Ryszard Kapuściński, said: "Stop. There beside you is another person. Meet him. [Meet her.] This sort of encounter is the greatest event, the most vital experience of all."

East meets West. North meets South. Here's my question: What if a successful university experience for our students; what if our success as nations, wherever we may hail from; and what if our success in working together to solve the most pressing global problems of our day all depend upon meeting, and being met? What if our collective success - - becoming greater than the sum of our parts, our competitive edge - - *all* hang upon meeting, and being met?

Universities are one of the only social institutions to have survived, both intact and wildly changed, since the medieval era. We have proven ourselves crucial to social, economic, and cultural evolution, and capable of staying relevant and competitive even during times of highly accelerated change such as we've seen this past century. We are an institution always ahead of its time because our purpose is timeless: to foster student learning; to preserve and increase the store of human knowledge; and to engage with and contribute to the wider society.

However, the great crises of our time—from climate change to pandemic disease to pervasive poverty to the challenges of cultural diversity—persist, and it is my contention that universities around the globe are no longer optimally organized to do what the world needs us to do. We are not yet

meeting and engaging with one another at the rate and at the profound level we need to in order to meet these challenges. We need a way forward where none yet exists.We need to be the icebreaker, providing safe passage from isolation and ineffectiveness to engagement and action.

I have described what I believe a great university should be within its own boundaries. It should *also* be a bridge between communities and between continents. There are two strategies I want to discuss with you today that will allow universities to reorganize and re-imagine ourselves so as to better fulfill our mission. These two strategies are: [1] inviting the world in by making our universities welcoming places for foreign students, and; [2] journeying outward into the world to build much deeper partnerships with one another than we have so far managed to establish.

First, on the topic of foreign students, which Vice-Chancellor Davis has already focused upon – I want to add one point. I am sure I'm not the only one in this room who has heard the arguments—from media, from secondary schools, from parents—against increasing international enrolment, especially in publicly-funded universities. With strong demand raising university entrance averages, some ask, how on earth can UBC allow in more foreign students? After all, they say, isn't it called *The University of British Columbia*?

Indeed it is, I reply … and each year I find myself strengthening the case for why our international enrolment goals *support* British Columbia and *enhance* its place in Canada and the world.

A study of the 10 highest-ranked universities in the world shows that international students comprise an average of 21 percent of the student body, higher than UBC's current 18 percent. In making the link between international students and a university's place on the world stage, we have to ask ourselves what edge these out-of-country students provide. The answer? Their perspectives. Their life experiences. Their cultural heritage, their linguistic idiosyncrasies, their unique ways of seeing and being in the world. Every classroom and every dormitory becomes a cross-cultural experiment of sorts. Informal interactions give both the local and the international students otherwise unattainable insights into global society.

International students bring with them their individual gifts and also their extended networks: the family, business, academic, cultural, and social ties that can help us navigate a complex world.

International students also contribute to the global increase of knowledge. Graduate students in particular bring with them the seeds of current and future research collaboration, by tending links among their professors across the global research enterprise. Professors congregate with like-minded colleagues, and these research hubs are in turn magnets for the keenest student minds.

Now, let's examine the second idea, the challenge of partnering with one another more deeply so that we may be better able to address global crises. The complex, three-part mission of universities is not going to change; it is we who must. But what are the limits of reinvention? And what promising models might be pursued?

First of all, let me be clear that I am not talking about wholesale reinvention of the university. As I stated earlier, we're survivors, and it's as important to be aware our strengths as it is to address our weaknesses. For example, the mix of conservatism and openness that marks universities, probably due in large measure to our commitment to collegial governance, is a remarkable asset if we can remember to see it as such. Where we have our work cut out for us is any time we try to extend that openness across borders.

Historically, universities were quite naturally cross-cultural, even though they were located in a single physical place. Most of us are familiar with the stories of wandering scholars like Erasmus, who contributed to the academic life of Paris, Leuven, Cambridge, and Basel. We're currently experiencing a profound need for such scholarly mobility, but our national systems are not cooperating fully. There are still many barriers to international recruitment, such as impaired transferability of credentials, especially among the professions, and narrow-minded visa rules. As well, many of our most important funding mechanisms remain inwardly focused, doing precious little to foster global collaboration.

Inviting the world in—from brilliant hiring to attracting the top international students—cannot of itself create the critical mass of talent that's needed to solve fundamental global problems. We need partners. We must collaborate, not only with other universities but also with community groups, civil society organizations, industry, and government.

And yet, you might be thinking, we've *built* partnerships! We've *formed* networks! We've *been* collaborating! Yes, and I would argue that so far, none of the university networks that arose at the turn of this century has fulfilled its promise. Truly successful networks typically arise in an organic fashion, from the bottom up. We can't direct this kind of growth hierarchically. But we can, I believe, foster the conditions in which it will happen naturally.

So how do we do this? I offer four possible ways forward:

[1] **Seek out existing success, however small, and support it**.
Let's ask ourselves: Where are there teams and groups of dedicated and inspired professors and students who are already working together across borders? How can we support them? Can we help them find new partners in other places? Can we assist small, focused and effective networks build the confidence to move to more ambitious global platforms? Can we stop thinking in terms of copying what our competitors are doing, where we all

end up doing the same thing, and instead ask how we can commit ourselves to nurturing and expanding existing success?

[2] **Challenge national myopia**.
A lot of us, even those living in smaller states, need to encourage our governments to change rules to allow research funding that crosses borders. That's how we grow. We need to encourage national research councils to sponsor joint initiatives. We must create opportunities for creative minds to meet.

[3] **Know your strengths … and communicate them authentically**.
Let's admit it, at least in this room for a start: None of our universities is good at everything. We try, though, don't we! It's to everyone's disadvantage when we spread ourselves thin. There is a staggering range of significant global issues to be addressed. President Mark Wrighton identified some this morning. Let's ask ourselves: Where are we best placed to make a real difference in collaboration with others? In the case of my own university, UBC, I suspect that we are most likely to contribute in a major way to global solutions on climate change, and sustainability more generally. I anticipate we can also make a real difference in collaborating on the prevention and control of infectious disease, and on intercultural understanding.

But our ability to lead a global effort toward understanding and combating ideological fundamentalism is less apparent. Like all universities, our

expertise is not balanced across all areas of research. In UBC's case, we have a deep knowledge of, and many friendships in, Asia, but we've invested less in creating knowledge about the Middle East or Central Asia. This is not a signal that UBC needs to do more Middle East or Central Asian research, but rather a reaffirmation of the necessity for cooperation with those who do.

[4] **Nurture global citizens**.

Inevitably, we focus on research as our means of addressing global problems. But we must never forget that our most important emissaries of that research are our graduates. So the questions we need to answer are these: Are our students being exposed to classes in which they truly confront the problems of our era? Are we doing enough to help them see how they could make a difference in the world? Are enough of them being introduced to perspectives from other cultures, other parts of the world—either through interactions with foreign students on campus or through travel-learning and international community service opportunities?

In conclusion, if we are really going to address the fundamental problems of global society, we can't just research and preach. We need to act—on our own campuses, yes, but in the communities we serve as well. Are we leaders in economic, environmental, or social sustainability? Are we modeling best practices in intercultural dialogue? Do our own workforce practices address issues of income equality? If not, why not? And if so, how

can we share those strengths with our communities? How can we build on them with our collaborators around the world?

We university leaders can become all too easily preoccupied with superficial measures of success: rising in the university rankings, collecting "trophy" partners, pleasing the media. But East meets West, and North meets South … over a cup of coffee this morning. Here in this room. Side by side over a microscope. In a dormitory room and on the sports field. On an icebreaker in the Arctic.

I will leave you with the idea that we might begin to measure our success this way: by the number of ways and times we allow one human being to meet another—"the greatest event, the most vital experience of all."

Thank you.

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