

Address by
Professor Kishore Mahbubani
Doctor of Humanities, *honoris causa*

Council Chairman Dr David Wong, Council Members, President Professor John Lee, distinguished guests, staff, alumni and friends of The Education University of Hong Kong.

I have the great honour today to deliver this thank you address on behalf of the five honorary doctorate recipients this year: renowned economist Professor Lawrence Lau Juen-yee, former President of The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Professor Justin Lin Yifu, former Chief Economist of the World Bank; Dr Michael Evan Mann, Director of the Penn Center for Science, Sustainability and the Media and vice provost for climate science, policy and action at the University of Pennsylvania; and Professor James J. Gross, eminent professor of psychology and the director of the Stanford Psychophysiology Laboratory. I am pleased to add that Lawrence and Justin are old personal friends of mine.

I am deeply aware of what a great privilege it is for me to stand before you today in such distinguished company. As a child, I had no concept of ever attending university, let alone receiving a doctorate. I came from a poor, broken family – my father was an alcoholic and a gambler, so my mother had to bring my three sisters and me up single-handedly. We lived in a house with no flushing toilet. I was put on a special feeding programme when I started school. When I was growing up, in the 1950s and 1960s, Singapore was a poor country with a per capita GDP of US\$500. None of our neighbours had ever attended university. I had no expectations of doing so either. In fact, after I completed my secondary education, I started work as a textile salesman, just like most young men from my community did. However, the Singapore government unexpectedly awarded me the President's Scholarship, which I had not applied for. I decided to take up the scholarship only because the stipend was greater than my wages as a textile salesman.

This completely changed the course of my life. My university education was the reason why I was able to become a diplomat and, later, the founding dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. And, perhaps more importantly, my training in philosophy profoundly shaped the way I think about the world. It revealed to me the vast vistas of knowledge and modes of thought which humanity has painstakingly built over the past 300,000 years. I may never have discovered any of this if I had fulfilled my original destiny as a textile salesman. I have always been immensely grateful for having been given the incredible gift of higher education – a gift that I had not even dreamed of receiving when I was eighteen.

It is now the responsibility and privilege of all of us who have received this gift to pass it down to the coming generations. This will not be an easy task. Higher education is increasingly being commercialised, threatening the survival of the study of the humanities and making it difficult for low-income students to receive quality education. While generative AI has great potential, it is also posing many issues in the field of education, including disseminating false information and potentially negatively impacting students' cognitive development. And as it becomes increasingly difficult to discern the truth amidst

the incredible number of fake videos, fake photos, and fake news online, belief in science and medicine is falling even further – especially in the West, where we are seeing returns of diseases that have long been controlled with vaccines.

In this difficult climate, education is more threatened than ever, and also more needed than ever. That is why it is so important that The Education University of Hong Kong's mission focuses not just on training an adaptable and competent workforce, but also inculcating the values of ethical responsibility and social care and contributing to human betterment. My fellow honourees and I are deeply grateful to The Education University of Hong Kong and all its staff and faculty, members of the council, and alumni for all your efforts to work towards this laudable mission over the past 31 years. I am confident that with your continued support, the University will be able to grow from strength to strength in the coming years as well.

Thank you.