The intercultural challenges of engineering education in a Greenlandic context

Greenland is a modern society with Self Governance, but only half a century ago it was primarily a fishing and hunting society governed as a colony by a Danish elite. The rapid changes have left Greenland with many social problems, and compared to Western Europe relatively few finish education beyond public school.

Since 2001 the Technical University of Denmark has offered a study program in Arctic Engineering primarily targeted at Greenlandic youth, but also students from, for example, Denmark, where the first three semesters are finished in Greenland. There are two main objectives for this program: to educate professionals with a deep understanding of the Arctic, and to give the Greenlandic youth a better chance of getting a higher education. To align the teaching philosophy with the Greenlandic students' cultural background, the curriculum structure has large interdisciplinary courses based on authentic local cases and intercultural group work.

This paper will focus on the challenges caused by many of the Greenlandic students' weak academic preparation, and the fact that the cultural background embedded in the Greenlandic language can make it very difficult to comprehend topics at an abstract level. Additionally, the group work and the class teaching are challenging due to the culturally-reticent and conflict-averse nature of many of the Greenlandic students, which gives the Danish students a dominant position. This often creates a negative spiral, where many Greenlandic students tend to withdraw from discussions, which are an important part of the education. The paper will discuss our experiences with handling these challenges.