UCA and AKAH Partner to Promote Development in Tajikistan

Hadi Husani (left), CEO of AKAH Tajikistan, and Muzaffar Jorubov, Chief Operating Officer at UCA, congratulate each other with an elbow bump at the signing ceremony.

The University of Central Asia (UCA) and the Aga Khan Agency for Habitat (AKAH) in Tajikistan signed a Memorandum of Understanding on July 27th to develop Khorog into a safe and resilient city, and collaborate on several educational initiatives, including building research capacities of young and mid-career scientists and lecturers.

A significant area of collaboration is the Khorog Urban Resilience Programme, which aims at developing strategies, policies, action-plans and activities to make Khorog a safe and resilient city. Areas of partnerships also include joint research projects, policy work, information and knowledge sharing, joint grant applications, facilities utilisation, as well as the establishment of advisory and working groups. As part of this agreement, AKAH will provide internships to UCA undergraduate students through UCA’s Cooperative Education Programme. To read the full story, click here.

UCA Board of Trustees: Two New Appointments

Dr. Nurlan Omurov

Prof. Andrew Petter, CM, QC

UCA is pleased to welcome two newly appointed members to its Board of Trustees. Dr. Nurlan Omurov is Deputy Minister of Education of the Kyrgyz Republic, and previously served as the Rector of the Kyrgyz-German Institute of Applied Informatics, and Dean of the Faculty of New Information Technologies at Naryn State University for 11 years. Professor Andrew Petter is the President of Simon Fraser University in Canada, and was appointed to the Order of Canada in 2018 in recognition of his commitment and leadership in advancing university-community engagement and higher education throughout the country. The Trustees, appointed by the Chancellor and Patrons of the University, bring a wealth of experience and expertise to UCA, and include prominent individuals with distinguished backgrounds in academia, government, development, and civil society. For a full list of trustees, click here.
Covid and the Challenges of Online Learning

In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, undergraduate students studying at UCA’s Naryn campus travelled home in March, and classes were temporarily suspended. While online classes resumed from June 1st to July 17th for Naryn campus students, classes at the Khorog campus were concluded in May prior to the acceleration of the pandemic in Tajikistan.

To ensure access and programme delivery to the best degree possible, UCA’s Digital and Distance Learning office optimised its learning management system for students and faculty, and provided online training for faculty, covering pedagogical and technical skills on teaching online. UCA’s Information Technology department also provided internet bandwidth, and regular IT support to each student across 9 countries for the duration of their online courses.

“While we placed a great emphasis on the pedagogy and preparation of learning materials for online delivery, it was equally important that there was an active reception of, and engagement with, the learning materials,” noted Soheil Ashrafi, Chair of the Department of Communications and Media, and Assistant Professor of Communications and Media at the Naryn campus.

Due to travel restrictions in the region, a limited number of students, faculty and staff continued living at UCA’s residential campuses. UCA implemented comprehensive safety measures in line with the University’s paramount goal to protect the health and wellbeing of the entire UCA community. These measures included restricting outside visitors, physical distancing in common areas, classes in separate rooms, food delivery options, a rotation of operations staff every three weeks, as well as testing for Covid-19 prior to entry on campus. To date, UCA has maintained Covid-free campuses; however, extensive procedures are in place in case a campus resident begins to show symptoms. As part of the mitigation procedures for the Covid-19 spread in Naryn, UCA offered 90 beds on the campus grounds to be used for observation zones. Since the handover in March, these observation zones have been actively managed by the Government of Naryn and have been used by Naryn residents. Fifty beds were also set up on the grounds of UCA’s Khorog campus.

Looking ahead to the 2020-2021 academic year, the Autumn semester is anticipated to commence on September 7th for all students in online mode across all undergraduate programmes. This mode of operation will be reviewed after one month, and will be continuously monitored to consider the best options to protect the health and wellbeing of the UCA community, while at the same time striving to ensure UCA students have the maximum opportunity for learning.

UCA and UTS Students Collaborate on Global Journalism Project

Undergraduate students from UCA’s Communications and Media programme participated in a one-month global journalism collaboration project alongside students from the University of Huddersfield (England), Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (Germany), Babes-Bolyai University (Romania) and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) in Australia.

Sixteen UCA students were paired with UTS students to research, identify, and source news stories, as well as produce short news and feature stories using multimedia. It provided UCA students with an opportunity to build their professional network, and gain practical experience in journalism. Participation was voluntary, and was counted towards UCA’s Cooperative Education Programme. As a result of this project, Suyuna Dadybaeva, and Sehar Naz Janani, UCA students, have recently co-authored and published articles on the UTS Central News Journalism Lab platform. Read their stories covering a “Unified Health Strategy Needed to Prevent Future Pandemics” and “Behind the Scenes: Essential Workers in Pakistan and Australia.”

Good to Know!

Fifth Cohort of Undergraduate Students Eagerly Await Start of Classes in September

This year UCA’s School of Arts and Sciences received a record number of applications for its undergraduate programme in Naryn (Kyrgyzstan) and Khorog (Tajikistan). The top 248 students have been shortlisted based on their academic and non-academic performance, and are awaiting final selection to become the fifth cohort, also known as the Class of 2025. Until health and safety issues relating to Covid-19 are resolved, classes are expected to be conducted online from September 7th 2020. Congratulations!
A Memorandum of Understanding was signed between UCA and the American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham) in Tajikistan to support UCA’s Cooperative Education Programme. Within this agreement, UCA undergraduate students will be able to apply for internships with AmCham Tajikistan’s Association Members. The internships are designed to strengthen a student’s learning experience by integrating on-campus studies with closely related work experience.

The Cooperative Education Programme of UCA offers paid and non-paid internships and prepares students for both academic and career success beyond the walls of the University. In 2019, 300 work placements were offered in 94 companies including international, government and non-governmental organisations, and private companies. Students have an opportunity to apply for placements in fields such as communications, monitoring and evaluation, business, finance, IT, geographic information systems, project management, research, human resources, and education.

Bashir Alam studies Computer Science at UCA. This summer he completed two online internships at HeySuccess, and Interns Pakistan, as part of UCA’s Cooperative Education Programme. “My first year at UCA was really amazing and fruitful. On top of this, UCA provided us with an opportunity to apply our gained knowledge to our internship placements,” said Bashir.

At HeySuccess, Bashir worked on content writing, public speaking, digital marketing and assisted HeySuccess customers in developing their CVs. During his placement at Interns Pakistan, he learnt various programming languages including HTML, CSS, Javascript, PHP, as well as how to use Wordpress, and was tasked to build a website. Bashir shared how these online internships also allowed him to improve his time management skills. “This was my first internship experience, and it was great to be challenged in a new role. I have already applied for further internship opportunities to continue gaining new skills which will complement my studies at UCA.”

Vint Cerf Shares Vision of Internet in the Next Decade

“Globally, there is a lot of work to be done on the Internet, because only about 50% of the Earth’s population currently has access,” said Vinton G. Cerf, Vice President and Chief Internet Evangelist at Google, during an online lecture organised by UCA. “There is still great freedom to design and build new applications for the Internet, to explore the rest of the solar system, and perhaps someday also implement an interstellar version in order to explore the rest of our galaxy.”

At Google, Vint Cerf contributes to global policy development, and is widely recognised as one of the “Fathers of the Internet” because of his contributions to designing the TCP/IP protocols and architecture of the Internet. The lecture, held on July 16th, covered the history as well as his vision of the future of the Internet, and was attended by well over 100 participants. The World Bank, and the State Committee for Information Technology and Communications of the Kyrgyz Republic, co-sponsored the lecture with UCA. Participants had an opportunity to ask questions after the presentation, and the lecture is posted in English and Russian on UCA’s YouTube channel.
Central Asian Faculty Development Programme Boosts Regional Expertise

Faculty development is an essential element of the University of Central Asia’s institutional architecture, especially when it comes to the recruitment of Central Asian faculty, to achieve a critical mass of regional research and teaching excellence. The Central Asian Faculty Development Programme (CAFDP) at UCA began in 2008 and is an important component of the University’s long-standing academic strategy. It aims at building capacity of Central Asian faculty members through formal post-graduate educational programmes at renowned global and partner universities. The programme also aims at attracting and retaining Central Asian faculty, as well as enhancing faculty expertise in UCA’s disciplines including Computer Science, Communications and Media, Earth and Environmental Sciences, Economics, Engineering, and Business Management.

"UCA is not a typical start-up university - not many are willing to build a fully residential campus with innovative curriculum taught in English in the mountainous regions of Central Asia, particularly for Central Asians to be taught by Central Asians who have been given an opportunity to pursue their post-doctoral degrees in some of the best universities around the world thanks to the CAFDP programme," said Kemel Toktomushev, CAFDP Fellow, Assistant Professor of Political Science, and Senior Research Fellow at UCA (standing in photo). "The decision to join the Central Asian Faculty Development Programme is one of the best decisions I have ever made."

CAFDP was launched prior to the start of undergraduate and graduate programmes at UCA, with the objective of developing a pool of talented Central Asian faculty members who, upon completion of their studies, would return to work at UCA. In its second phase, CAFDP is offering scholarships to potential faculty members and researchers to complete their Masters, Doctoral, or Post-doctoral studies. Current faculty and non-faculty members also have an opportunity to complete post-doctoral programmes. UCA’s recent partnerships include the University of Cambridge (UK), University of Alberta (Canada) and Simon Fraser University (Canada).

From 2008 to 2018, 43 CAFDP fellows completed their graduate and doctoral studies at universities in Germany, Canada, the United Kingdom, United States and Singapore. There are currently 13 CAFDP fellows at various stages of their studies since 2018. Across both phases, 41% of fellows are from Kyrgyzstan, 37% Tajikistan, 19% Kazakhstan, and 9% from Pakistan. To learn more about CAFDP and other opportunities, click here.

Aid Agencies Visit UCA Campus in Khorog

On July 26th, the University of Central Asia welcomed a delegation of representatives from international organisations to the Khorog campus. The guests learnt about UCA’s academic programmes, toured the facilities and explored the University’s library resources.

"To me UCA is really a fundamental contribution; the ability to get over the legacy of the Great Game and create a network of highly committed intelligent academics and decisionmakers in this region that hopefully contributes to development," remarked Jan-Peter Olters, Head of the World Bank in Tajikistan, following the tour of the Khorog campus. He also expressed interest in collaborating with the University, including sharing research and other academic resources.

From L to R: Honor Flanagan, Head of the UK’s Department for International Development in Central Asia, Hadi Husaini, CEO of the Aga Khan Agency for Habitat Tajikistan, Walburga Roos, Director and Head of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in Tajikistan, and Jan-Peter Olters-Head of the World Bank in Tajikistan.
Harnessing the Power of Education in Afghanistan

In the belief that education is the most cost-effective agent of change, students, particularly women, are reaping the benefits of the myriad short courses provided by UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPCE) in Afghanistan.

Royagul was born in Nusai (Afghanistan), and is an active student at SPCE in Darwaz. She has enrolled in SPCE’s English, International Computer Driving License and mental math programmes since 2018.

She shared how SPCE has helped foster positive changes in her life. “The skills I am developing at SPCE are enabling me to work and earn extra income for my family. Knowledge is the power that one can apply to improve one’s life.” She is now employed as a Monitoring and Evaluation Officer with the Aga Khan Agency for Habitat, and plans to continue her studies at SPCE. “UCA is a trusted organisation with the highest ethical standards. I highly recommend the youth of Darwaz to take advantage of the courses and programmes offered by the University. I know that it is challenging for woman working in Darwaz, but I would like to motivate and inspire other girls and women by my example – to learn and change,” added Royagul.

SPCE Launches Summer School in Khorog

The School of Professional and Continuing Education of UCA is launching a summer school in Khorog (Tajikistan). The classes will be organised online and offline in August with appropriate physical distancing and other safety and sanitary precautions.

The Summer School programme will include courses in mathematics, English and Russian languages, financial literacy, and basic Java programming. SPCE will also launch its new academic year in September, offering a variety of programmes for young learners and adults across its learning centres in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Afghanistan. Click here to learn more about SPCE.

SPCE Promotes Gender-Responsive Learning in Afghanistan

UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education in Faizabad (Afghanistan) held a six-day online seminar on Gender Responsive Learning Environments (GRLE) in July for 35 Afghan learners. GRLE seminars are aimed at providing awareness and enhancing technical and pedagogical skills of current students and prospective teachers, in order to respond to gender based-needs in the schools, and promote gender responsive educational environments. These sessions were led by the trainers Sohrab Nazari (pictured) and Sasan Azizi. The seminar was organised as part of the Pathways to Innovation Project, and is funded by Canada’s International Development Research Centre in partnership with the Aga Khan Foundation Canada.
"I am the only person to receive higher education in my family"

Shukria is a lifelong learner, and has always strived with enthusiasm to gain knowledge. She is 24 years old and lives with her parents in Bahar village in Ishkashim district (Afghanistan).

Despite having no formal education themselves, her parents have always been supportive of their children’s education, and sell eggs from their small poultry farm to pay the fees. Since November 2015, Shukria has enrolled in English language and computer literacy courses at UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education learning centre in Ishkashim.

“My achievements at UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education motivated me to pursue further education at the Afghanistan Technical Vocational Institute’s Faculty of Information Technology in Kabul,” said Shukria. “Despite the adversities I have faced in my life, I have been able to achieve outstanding success. I am the only person who has received higher education in my family.”

Shukria is now working as a Regional Project Assistant with the Aga Khan Education Services in Afghanistan and plans to attend the University of Central Asia next year.

International Guest Speakers Enrich SPCE’s Online Courses

The Covid pandemic has brought an unexpected richness to the learning experience of students as they interact with a host of international teachers. UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education in Dushanbe (Tajikistan) has shifted over 85% of its learners to online courses, despite some challenges with the Internet connection in Tajikistan. As part of the online curriculum, international speakers delivered guest lectures on a variety of topics to SPCE students. “The sessions improved our speaking and writing skills, and helped us to gain new international perspectives,” noted one of the students.

Amanda Boatwright, from the American University in Iraq, and former English Fellow at SPCE, taught Grade 11 Academic Achievement Programme students how to be critical thinkers. She also shared her experience of teaching in Iraq during the pandemic.

Joshua Huffman, political sciences teacher and graduate of West Virginia University, delivered two online sessions to SPCE’s intermediate level learners on Conversational English. He also conducted a book club for Academic Listening and Speaking students, and shared tips on how to read the news critically.

Michael Slater, professional artist and graduate of Coastal Carolina University in the United States, conducted two sessions about art and life in Colorado. Students had an opportunity to interview the artist about what inspires him to paint, and discussed the meaning of some of his artworks.

American pilot, Bill Murden, was interviewed online through Zoom by SPCE’s Academic and Listening and Speaking course students about life in Alaska and Virginia. Bill graduated from Averett University, and is currently a pilot at Hageland Aviation.

Dr. Ryan Copping, Professor of Cinema Studies at Grand Valley State University in Michigan (USA), led a discussion on Zoom with Academic Listening and Speaking students about movies and teaching cinematography in the USA. The session provided SPCE students with different viewpoints, and students received new resources for self-study.

Did You Know?

UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education offers programmes to students from 7 to 70 years of age. Since 2006, more than 150,000 students (53% women) have graduated from SPCE, completing one or more programmes from 450 available training modules throughout Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Afghanistan.
UCA Research Highlights Impact of Food Consumption on Health

Kyrgyzstan, along with many of the countries in the region, is experiencing a nutrition transition that influences the health profile of its population. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are today responsible for over 80% of deaths, and overweight and obesity cases are on the rise. On July 22nd, Dr. Kanat Tilekeyev, Senior Research Fellow at UCA’s Institute of Public Policy and Administration, delivered a presentation on malnutrition, dietary patterns, and food systems development in Kyrgyzstan.

Dr. Tilekeyev presented preliminary results from an ongoing study, suggesting that there is a visible gap in the level of NCDs between the Northern and Southern regions of Kyrgyzstan, as well as consumption levels of meat, fruit, vegetable, processed food, and sugary foods between regions. Dr. Tilekeyev suggested a possible causality on how nutrition practices in different regions may cause different health outcomes. This will remain food for thought for now, as the study is ongoing until December 2020. It is part of a project on “Gathering evidence and supporting multi-stakeholder engagement on the role of diets and food systems in the prevention of obesity and non-communicable diseases in Kyrgyzstan”. It is supported by UCA in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations.

Publications

Mountain Societies Research Institute 2019 Annual Report

UCA is pleased to share the Mountain Societies Research Institute (MSRI) Annual Report for 2019. A year of change, diversification, and increased productivity aptly describe how MSRI responded to the challenges of 2019. MSRI strengthened ongoing programmes, initiated new projects, taught courses in Earth and Environmental Sciences at UCA, conducted a graduate level Certificate Programme on Natural Resources Management, and hosted Summer Universities and workshops. MSRI staff also published 24 papers and reports, including 16 in refereed journals and two MSRI Research Briefs. To download a copy of the report in English, click here.

Forced Migration of Kyrgyz to China in the 20th Century

UCA’s Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit published a research paper on “Forced Migration of Kyrgyz to China in the 20th Century: Field Research in 2015 in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China.” To download a copy in Russian, click here.

Suicide in Asia – a Literature Review

Over 1.5 million people die from suicide each year, and approximately one billion people are indirectly affected by it. Suicide varies around the globe due to factors relating to culture, context, environment, and location. To develop effective prevention and intervention strategies, suicide has to be studied within its own socio-cultural context.

UCA’s Institute of Public Policy and Administration (IPPA) has published a paper on “Suicide in Asia: A Literature Review.” It attempts to provide an overview of the literature on suicide, prevalence trends by age, gender and economic status, and the common risk factors associated with suicide in Asia, focusing specifically on Central Asia. To download a copy in English, click here. Additional publications within IPPA’s working papers series are available for free download from UCA’s website here.

Drivers of Stunting Reduction in the Kyrgyz Republic

Chronic malnutrition among infants and children continues to represent a global public health concern. Kyrgyzstan has achieved rapid declines in stunting over the last 20 years, despite modest increases in gross domestic product per capita. A research report was published in July on the drivers of stunting reduction in Kyrgyzstan. It was based on study assessing the drivers of nutrition change and stunting reduction, as well as related policies and programmes in Kyrgyzstan.

Roman Mogilevskii, Zalina Enikeeva, Mariia Iamshchikova, and Dilbara Kirbasheva from UCA’s Institute of Public Policy and Administration, were co-authors of this report, alongside researchers from the Hospital for Sick Children (Canada), University of Toronto (Canada), and the Aga Khan University (Pakistan). To download a copy in English, click here.
Upcoming Event

The Playful Eye Goes to Kyrgyzstan: A Mindful Art Experience

UCA is pleased to announce an adventurous exploration of art and self, combining elements of play, mindfulness and embodied practice. The online event will be held via Zoom on August 26th at 7:00-8:00pm (Bishkek time). It is organised in collaboration with the Gapar Aitiev Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Arts, UCA’s School of Arts and Sciences’ Communications and Media Department, and the Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit of UCA.

Join us at Kyrgyzstan’s premier national art museum to discover traditional and modern Kyrgyz art, through guided practices encouraging mindfulness and contemplation. During this one-hour interactive session, participants will explore three artworks from the collection through experimental engagement practices. Register today.

Environment Competition Launched for Journalists

An Eco-Journalist 2020 competition for journalists was launched in June, aimed at promoting environmental issues, and creating an enabling environment to engage mass media in environmental programmes. The competition was launched by Aarhus Centres of Kyrgyzstan, including the Naryn Aarhus Centre based in UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education learning centre. The contest is open to representatives from Kyrgyz mass media, online media, TV journalists, independent authors, and entry-level journalists, who can write articles on environmental issues. Submissions should be published by any media outlet or TV channel in Kyrgyzstan before September 15th 2020. Three winners will be selected for the Best Article in Printed Media, the Best Article in Online Media, and the Best TV Story or Report.

The Contest is organised with the support from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Programme Office in Bishkek, and the State Agency for Protection of the Environment and Forestry under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic. Learn more.

Environment Improvement Programme Boosts Digital Competencies

UCA’s Education Improvement Programme (EIP) will hold an online professional development programme from August 3rd to 21st for high school teachers from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and other EIP partner schools. The three-week programme will be led by Jamal Papieva, Gulmira Orynbayeva, and Noyob Paishanbiev, EIP Programme Coordinators, alongside facilitators from partner schools. It will cover how to use Zoom effectively for online teaching and learning, how to use Google classroom for effective remote learning, 21st century competencies, as well as subject-based teaching and learning strategies. Click here to learn more about EIP.