Online Classes Begin at UCA

The bell ringing ceremony at the University of Central Asia (UCA) heralded the start of the new academic term of 2020-2021 at the School of Arts and Sciences (SAS). Due to health and distancing requirements of Covid-19, all classes are being conducted online until it is safe to return to the University’s campuses in Naryn (Kyrgyzstan) and Khorog (Tajikistan).

Welcoming the students to the first day of classes on September 7, the Rector of UCA appreciated how well the students and faculty have been coping with the uncertainties and issues related to Covid-19. “What defines us,” he said “is how we respond to such challenges.” He hoped that the present health crisis will also teach us how to use technology in developing new methods of teaching and reaching remote communities.

Diana Pauna Looks Back at Four Memorable Years at UCA

Diana Pauna served as Dean of UCA’s School of Arts and Sciences from 2016 to 2020. At the end of August 2020 she returned to her home in Latvia to spend more time with her family. In this interview she reflects on the joys and challenges of working at a start-up University.

In what way does UCA differ from other universities where you have worked?
I responded to the call for the Dean’s position because I was attracted to UCA’s mission to serve mountain communities. When I first visited the Naryn campus in May 2016, it was still under construction, but the surrounding beauty of the mountains made me commit to building this new School of Arts and Sciences. Also, UCA being part of one of the largest private sector development agencies in the world, the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), promised to be an experience I could not pass up.

When you look back at your four years at UCA, what gives you the most satisfaction?
It is definitely the process of building up and shaping the School of Arts and Sciences and all the challenges and opportunities that come with such a massive endeavour. Among the key ones were licensing the programmes, establishing partnerships, developing the curriculum, recruiting students faculty and staff, positioning the School within university towns, and developing local academic and industrial partnerships that was made possible under the guidance of Dr. Diana Pauna served as Dean of UCA’s School of Arts and Sciences from 2016 to 2020.
Diana Pauna Looks Back at Four Memorable Years at UCA

of senior management and an excellent SAS team. I am proud of having helped lay the foundations for the School that welcomes all, inspires the community, develops individual talent, and engages the world.

What is the significance of UCA as a residential university?
In fact, living and working on campus has been another new experience for me as it has been for the majority of faculty and students. Living on campus promotes pluralism and appreciation of the values and cultures of students and faculty who come from over 20 countries. In addition, it fosters the academic and personal growth of students because of enhanced faculty interaction, and promotes life-long friendships. A sense of belonging is developed when living and working together. As a community we live together, support each other in difficult and sad times, and celebrate happy moments and successes. In short, a residential campus is a safe and inclusive community that promotes student success.

Where do you see SAS five years from now? What will be new and different?
We are now moving from the setting-up phase to a maturing of the programme. The focus will be on enriching the curriculum, and enhancing the quality of teaching and scholarship, including a more rigorous research programme. While taking into account the challenges and opportunities of the changing landscape of higher education globally, the key is to maintain stability within this rapidly changing environment. First, I see a growth in international programs for students and faculty with increased interaction through joint academic projects and online collaborations. Second, a strong UCA Alumni Association will be there to support the School’s further development through in-kind and financial contributions, and I hope that quite a few returning alumni will serve the School either as faculty or staff. Third, cross-disciplinary collaborations are to be promoted both in teaching and learning as well as research within UCA and beyond. Fourth, the role of technology and of hybrid and online teaching will provide opportunities for the faculty and students to engage in cross-disciplinary projects in the region and globally.

As a development university, UCA is focused on the socio-economic growth of Central Asia. The high quality of education at UCA makes the graduates attractive to overseas universities and job opportunities. What steps has UCA taken to counter this possible brain drain and migration? UCA fosters in students the leadership skills needed to work collaboratively and ethically to build a more just and humane world. Through academic and community-based projects students are exposed to local needs and ways they can contribute to the sustainable development of mountain communities. The enthusiasm that I have seen in students to initiate new ideas and projects that has immediate impact, encourages their willingness and readiness to work for their country in general and their local community in particular. Also, we have great examples of faculty and staff who have returned to work for UCA after their graduate and postgraduate studies abroad, and are serving as role models to our students. Finally, strengthening the cooperative education program, working with the employers, and strengthening the UCA Alumni Association should provide inspiration and support structures for students to stay or return to their home country and the region.

UCA will achieve another milestone next year at its first SAS graduation. What advice would you give the graduates?
Remembering the Class of 2021, I am so proud to see where they are now from what they were when they started in the Fall of 2016 when they were wearing their Orientation Program t-shirts with the slogan: “The Journey Begins Here”. Indeed, it has been an amazing journey for all of us, and I appreciate their tolerance and patience when being subjected to the uncertainties and challenges of a start-up university. At the same time, it has been a learning experience that starting any new project requires one to be flexible and agile. These qualities are even more necessary nowadays as we come to grips with the so called “new normal”. I have watched these students with admiration on their new journey, and we all know that it takes longer and is more demanding than we initially thought. Using the mountains as a metaphor, I wish them to scale every mountain top, so keep climbing to reach the top.

What will you remember most about your tenure at UCA?
The first meeting with His Highness the Aga Khan, and each and every subsequent meeting, has been unique and truly inspiring. The support and leadership style of the Chairman of UCA’s Board of Trustees, Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, be it a personal meeting or just a phone call, has been a great learning experience. All my colleagues who have been there for me during sad and happy moments, and interactions with my AKDN colleagues has provided valuable professional development. Learning Kyrgyz and Tajik dancing, nearly every day there was something new and special that I am so grateful for.

During my first address on campus to the students, faculty, and staff on 18 October 2016, just before the Naryn campus inauguration, I said that great things have been done when men and mountains meet. I would like to see if great things can also be done when women and mountains meet. I hope I have made a small contribution to this great transformation of men, women, and mountains. Thank you all for the opportunity to lead the School for the past four years. It has truly been an honour and a wonderful journey.

Dr. Diana Pauna briefing new faculty during on-boarding sessions
Playful Eye Creates New Experience of Art and Self in Kyrgyzstan

The University of Central Asia hosted the Playful Eye, a global art event, in Bishkek and Osh cities of Kyrgyzstan. Participants experienced an adventurous exploration of art and self, combining elements of play, mindfulness, and embodied practice.

Playful Eye took place in Osh city on September 17. The project creators, Dr. Garbutt and Dr. Roenpagel, were online to lead the event with Altyn Kapalova, Research Fellow at UCA’s CHHU, who conducted the event in association with the Turgunbai Sadykov Osh Regional Museum of Fine Arts.

“Art therapy has enormous healing potential to help restore the balance that is drained by isolation and anxiety that is all too common during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Playful Eye is an art project that is a real asset in these uncertain times,” said Altyn Kapalova.

Due to coronavirus-related restrictions, the open-air event was conducted in the garden of the museum, and the 25 participants were required to wear masks and maintain physical distancing. Despite these constraints, it turned out to be a unique event playfully engaging body, mind, sight, and imagination to encounter earth, sky, and others. In one of the exercises the visitors worked in pairs, one being a work and the other a spectator.

To Khurshida Rashodijaeva, a resident of Osh city, drawing in her mind with eyes closed was an unusually meditative experience. “It was something very exciting that I had never done before.”

The first event in Bishkek took place on August 26 in collaboration with the Gapar Aitiev Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Arts, UCA’s School of Arts and Sciences, and the Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit (CHHU) of UCA. Following the Bishkek event, the

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Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of UCA, conveyed greetings on behalf of the Chancellor of the University, His Highness the Aga Khan, and the Trustees. He reminded the students that while they were admitted on merit and potential for leadership, much is expected of them during the five-year course of study. He hoped they would take full advantage of the resources available to them, on and off campus, and emphasized that students coming from diverse cultures contribute to a pluralistic ethos that is one of the unique strengths of campus culture at UCA.

Speaking on the occasion, the new Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at UCA remarked that he identified with the incoming class, because he himself came on board only a week ago. “I am excited about working at UCA for many reasons,” said Dr. Maxim Khomyakov, “first because it is a development university with a mission to improve the quality of life of mountain communities. Second, it is regional in nature, spanning three countries, and focused on research on issues Central Asia is facing or likely to face in the future. Third, it is a start-up university, able to respond with nimbleness to challenges without being encumbered by tradition and set ways of doing things. In fact, the School of Arts and Sciences will be graduating its very first class next year.”

The University of Central Asia’s focus on mountain communities has attracted over 70 percent of its students from rural areas and secondary towns; 55 percent are from Tajikistan, 23 percent from Kyrgyzstan, 11 percent from Pakistan, 5 percent from Kazakhstan, 4 percent from Afghanistan, and the balance 2 percent from four other countries.

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The Playful Eye, founded by Dr. Michael Garbutt and Dr. Nico Roenpagel, has been held at some of the world’s leading public and private art museums, including the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Asian Art in Washington DC, the Olbricht Foundation’s Collectors’ Room in Berlin, the National Gallery of Australia, the Queensland Art Gallery, and the Gallery of Modern Art. Kyrgyzstan is the first country to host this global event in Central Asia.

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UCA Training Improves Livelihoods for Women

The Civil Society Initiative (CSI) of the University of Central Asia has launched a six-month online training programme to build a community of women practitioners who can share knowledge, experiences, and practices in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 40 representatives of Civil Society Organisations (CSO) from Kyrgyzstan are attending this online training which was launched on September 2, 2020.

Entitled “Women’s Voices Amid the COVID-19 Crisis”, the selected participants are winners of an online competition among women-led and gender equality-focused CSOs, who developed and shared best ideas for improving the local health infrastructure to meet the needs of vulnerable women. Another objective is developing prevention measures and support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

Women-led and gender equality-focused CSOs were selected by the Aga Khan Foundation, and will be awarded a small grant to implement their projects at the local level after they pass the courses. Apart from gaining new knowledge and skills, participants also get support and mentoring for drafting outlines of collaborative actions for COVID-19.

Veronica Cretu, an international gender expert, is leading the online workshop. She is a representative of the Participation Council to the UN, and Women Moldova and Global Woman Aspirational Award Winner of 2019. Ms. Cretu has considerable experience working in Central Asia on issues related to gender equality, open government, citizen engagement, and open data.

Nurzida Monoldorova, one of 40 participants, is excited about this training programme and confident that the knowledge and skills she is gaining during the training at UCA will help her organization to achieve their project goals more effectively.

“Women’s Voices Amid the COVID-19 Crisis” is a six-month online training project of UCA, funded by the Aga Khan Foundation and Global Affairs Canada, Foundations for Health and Empowerment, and Advancing Gender Equality and Civil Society.

UCA is committed to working on empowering local communities as well as developing partnerships with government in building a better understanding of the role of civil society. Since 2017, UCA’s Civil Society Initiative has been fostering an enabling policy and administrative environment for civil society in Central Asia, and to assist the development of a broad spectrum of civil society actors.

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Komuz Day Celebrated in Kyrgyzstan

A new national holiday was adopted last year (2019) to pay tribute to one of the cultural symbols of Kyrgyzstan, the three-stringed musical instrument known as komuz. It is an ancient musical instrument which dates back to the 4th century CE.

The University of Central Asia’s Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit works to preserve and draw upon the rich cultural traditions and heritages of Central Asia as assets for future generations. Its rich Cultural Heritage Book Series has a number of book publications dedicated to musical traditions of Central Asia, including a fundamental work “Kyrgyz Instrumental Music: Analysis, Thoughts, and Opinions”.

This two-volume work written by Kyrgyz ethno-musicologist and komuz player Asan Kaibylda uulu presents findings from over 20 years of ethnographic research on Kyrgyz komuz music. The books contain rich narratives on the history of Kyrgyz küü, instrumental music played primarily on the komuz, and a comprehensive study of all known and unknown recorded and unrecorded Kyrgyz instrumental music by master komuz players. The volumes are supplemented by music CDs with over 100 komuz melodies, with narratives on their histories by the author.
Success Follows Nurzat Jamshitova to Naryn

Nurzat explaining the design of one of her creations.

Working from Naryn, Nurzat Jamshitova is gaining increasing popularity 400 kilometres away in Bishkek with her new line of clothing. Owner of a small sewing atelier with modern equipment, she says she owes her success to the skills she learnt at UCA’s SPCE Entrepreneurship Programme. Her passion for sewing helped her make an outstanding presentation, which helped secure a $5000 low interest loan from KICB Bank.

Before attending SPCE, Nurzat tried her luck at numerous sewing workshops in Bishkek but was not able to make ends meet. Nevertheless, she dreamed of her own business but lacked resources and knowledge to pitch her business to banks for a loan. Nurzat intuitively knew that knowledge was the key to achieving her dreams, and when she learned about SPCE’s Entrepreneurship Programme, she enrolled.

After completing the Entrepreneurship Program and securing a loan from KICB Bank, Nurzat bought all the necessary equipment, including sewing machines and fabric. She also realized that an absence of ateliers in Naryn would give her a readymade market and decided to set up shop there. Her business began to thrive as clients began ordering ethnic dresses in a modern style. She became a mentor for young ladies in Naryn, and in a short period her clientele in Naryn grew rapidly, and she even began attracting orders from Bishkek. This success allowed her to pay off her KICB loan early.

“I’m grateful to the University of Central Asia for launching such entrepreneurship courses through SPCE. Education is the key to success, and the skills I learned to plan a business, write a business plan, understand accounting, manage time, and financial literacy has made all the difference,” says Nurzat.

French Ambassador Donates Books to UCA Library

UCA welcomed the French Ambassador, Yasmine Gouedard (second from right), to the Khorog campus on September 4. “It was a great opportunity for me to visit UCA. This is a very impressive and ambitious project, and every time I visit this place, I want to be a student again. Its closeness to nature is a stunning environment for studying.” During her visit, the Ambassador also donated books to UCA’s library.

UCA Offers Science Journalism Course

The US Embassy in Kazakhstan and the University of Central Asia’s School of Professional and Continuing Education are launching a Science Journalism course.

The course is aimed at providing journalists enhanced knowledge in the sciences as well as improving their English writing skills. It will help journalists interpret and write about scientific articles in an interesting and comprehensible way.

The course is open to full-time and freelance journalists currently working in the Kazakh media. As part of the course, journalists can also participate in a competition for small grants (up to $500) to create video/audio on scientific topics.

The online course is going to be conducted once a week on weekends, and will last three months.

Applications are accepted until October 16, 2020. The course begins on November 1, 2020.

To apply, click here.

Conversations about Books and Social Media

UCA’s Continuing Education Unit (CEU) in Faizabad (Afghanistan) held an English Talking Club on the topic of Books and Social Media on September 20. Students practiced their spoken English in a fun atmosphere with their teacher Shahim Naderi. Previously, CEU conducted similar sessions on Peace, as well as Health and Wealth. CEU is a part of UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education, and participation in the Talking Club is free.
Development in Kyrgyzstan reveals two important trends: declining agricultural production and a steady increase of remittances from labour migration. These trends suggest a transformative effect of migration, negating an overly simplistic investment effect of financial remittances on long standing livelihood activities. Although many studies agree that labour migration contributes to poverty reduction in rural Kyrgyzstan, little attention has been paid so far to the question: What effect does migration have on rural development?

The University of Central Asia is an academic partner of the AGRUMIG project supported by the Horizont-2020 EU program. AGRUMIG project explores the link between migration and rural development in seven countries: China, Thailand, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Moldova. In Kyrgyzstan, the study focuses on the Naryn, Jalal-Abad, and Batken regions, and is being implemented by UCA’s Mountain Societies Research Institute (MSRI). Highlights of MSRI’s Research Report #7 in English is supported by an animated video, and the report is available for free download.

Adapting to Distance Learning in the Age of COVID-19

The University of Central Asia’s Education Improvement Programme (EIP) was quick to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic as schools closed and distance learning became a necessity. On short notice teachers had to switch from using textbooks to online platforms and social media to facilitate learning. This meant identifying, adapting, and developing teaching and learning material for online and offline use. The new material prepared by EIP was sent directly to the teachers of the sixty public schools that the University of Central Asia supports in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan.

Responding to requests from teachers, EIP conducted an Online Professional Development Programme (OPDP) in August for UCA partner and non-partner schools in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, demonstrating best practices for online teaching. The objective was to develop knowledge and skills in the effective use of online platforms and educational technologies. This included designing lessons for online teaching, and ways to foster and assess creative thinking.

The programme modules were designed to develop autonomous, resourceful, and independent learners. Teachers were encouraged to ask open-ended questions, learn collaboratively, and conduct mock lessons and receive peer feedback. They also designed unit plans and created resources to support online teaching and learning. The programme was conducted by EIP staff in cooperation with faculty members and teachers from partner institutions, and was offered in English, Russian, Kazakh and Kyrgyz languages.

“The course was productive and helpful, and with the knowledge gained I am much more confident that I can create and conduct interesting lessons online,” remarked Farida Tanieva, English teacher from Kazakhstan. “Thanks to EIP for extending a helping hand to teachers in these uncertain times. We learnt a lot about how to use online teaching tools,” said Elena Debelaya, School Director and English language teacher from Kyrgyzstan.

One of the key issues highlighted by teachers was the lack of teaching and learning resources to support student development in the context of 21st century competencies and assessing student performance. As a result, teachers and faculty from partner institutions and EIP staff are developing teaching, learning, and assessment materials to facilitate project-based learning and conduct experiments using easily available low-cost material. Project assessment rubrics and pre- and post-tests will facilitate assessment of learning and the impact of these initiatives on the achievements of students.

Following the OPDP, teachers have been sharing their own and their students’ work with each other via social media. This spontaneous online professional learning community is being further developed with online teacher meetings in groups based on areas of interest.
COVID-19 and Cyber Vulnerabilities

The Covid pandemic has changed people’s lifestyles and routines along with social distancing, obsessive sanitation, and work habits that involve increasing reliance on the Internet. This has also opened doors to vulnerabilities of cyber-attacks, theft of personal information, and control of home networks. To highlight these dangers and provide security advice, the University of Central Asia organized an online lecture with Faheem Ali, an international expert on cyber security, on September 28.

He gave examples of how an attack is launched to steal personal data. Known as “Pishing”, it often occurs as an innocent email that appears from a friend or trusted individual, containing a link that launches a virus through which the hacker takes control of the computer and eventually personal data, passwords, credit cards, and bank account information.

There are thousands of fake websites using names that sound similar to bona fide aid organizations designed to dupe the victim into donating money and credit card information. Faheem Ali suggested that domain names can give a sense of their trustworthiness. A URL that begins with https, where the last letter “s” indicates enhanced security and trust.

Among other topics, the lecture also gave information on how to protect home networks. To see the entire lecture on UCA’s YouTube channel, click here.

Factors of Development and Obstacles to Growth in Naryn

Naryn Oblast of the Kyrgyz Republic is rich in a variety of natural resources, such as mountain pastures, water, and forest resources, creating potential for opening and developing micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSME).

The ecosystem, highland pastures, climate, and fertile soils are highly suitable for bee-farming, mountain tourism, herbs collection, and livestock breeding. However, there has been no significant development in these sectors. A total of 96 MSME were surveyed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The authors identified key development issues of MSME and presented conclusions and recommendations for Kyrgyzstan. The publication in Russian language is available for free download.
English Language Skills for Learners in Tajikistan and Afghanistan

The University of Central Asia’s School of Professional and Continuing Education is launching a Cambridge Assessment Testing system (CATs) English Language Programme in partnership with the Cambridge Malaysian Education and Development Trust.

CATs is a new, online and offline, multi-level English language learning and testing programme. It has been designed to serve as a supplement to English language learning in primary, secondary, and high schools as well as for supporting young adults in higher education. It is also beneficial for those wanting to improve their English for work purposes. The programme is developed by experts in Cambridge, UK.

Learners from Tajikistan and Afghanistan can use CATs online or offline via a mobile app. CATs is aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) that prepares learners for TOEFL and IELTS international examinations.

UCA is inviting all interested students to register: in English for Afghanistan, and in Russian for Tajikistan.

Apply for Admission to UCA’s School of Arts and Sciences

Admissions are now open for UCA’s undergraduate programme at the School of Arts and Sciences for the 2021-22 academic year. UCA offers an international standard of education, dedicated and qualified faculty, full scholarships and grants, and a vibrant student life.

The University offers undergraduate programmes in Communications and Media (BA), Economics (BA), Computer Science (BSc), and Earth and Environmental Sciences (BSc). Depending on the major, students attend classes in Naryn (Kyrgyzstan) or Khorog (Tajikistan).

Interested applicants are encouraged to apply by March 15th 2021. Click here for more information.

University of Cambridge Scholarships Available for Masters and PhD

The University of Central Asia in partnership with the Cambridge Trust is pleased to announce scholarship opportunities for Masters and Doctoral study at the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom. Click here for more information.

The scholarships are available for students wishing to pursue Masters or Doctoral studies in the following fields: Computer Science, Engineering, Communications and Media, Business Management, Earth and Environmental Sciences, or Economics. The fields reflect the majors offered by UCA’s School of Arts and Sciences.