

PROF. DR. CHRISTOPHER J GERRY
UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA
CLASS OF 2024 CONVOCATION
JUNE 15, 2024

Good morning, everyone.

Your Excellencies Dogdurkul Kendirbaeva, Minister of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic;

Saidzoda Rahim Hamro, Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan.

Altynbek Ergeshov, Governor of Naryn Oblast.

Mirzonabot Alisher Khudoberdi, Governor of Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast.

Dr Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Chairman of the Board of Trustees.

Members of the Board.

Dr Maxim Khomyakov, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences;

UCA faculty and staff.

Parents and family members.

Distinguished guests....

AND...of course, most especially the graduates of the Class of 2024:

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First and foremost, I would like to offer my congratulations to all of you. To have completed your degree and to be able to call yourself a graduate of the University of Central Asia is an incredible accomplishment. What a journey you have all been on.

Convocation is a special event. It is a celebration and a recognition of four or five years of challenging study, of personal growth, of new and enduring friendships, and of hope and expectation about the future. Few occasions hold as much pride and significance for you as well as for those who supported you along the way.

For you to have travelled this journey and reached this point, you relied not only on your own talent, intellect and determination to succeed, but also on the support of your teachers, your peers, your mentors, the student life teams, your donors and supporters and also, most importantly, your parents and families.

So, as you reflect on this day, I hope that you can enjoy celebrating your success and sharing those celebrations with your families and friends. It is a significant landmark for them too, so

pause for thought, and ask yourself what this day means to your mum, your dad, your siblings, your grandparents, your friends and celebrate with them and for them.

In fact, this ability to **empathise**, to view the world from another's perspective, is a vital life skill. It underscores what it means to be a civilised society, it is the connection arising from the shared experiences that unite us as human beings. Empathy is the first casualty of conflict and dispute. Empathy defines and determines the success of all our relationships – in business, in government, and in our social lives. As Melinda Gates observed, “If we don't have empathy – then it doesn't matter how much we master the secrets of science, we're not really solving problems; we're just working on puzzles.”

Empathy is not often listed on the terms of reference for an advertised job, still more rarely do we cite it as a strength on our resumes. It isn't easy to teach, though the philosophy and values that underscore UCA's programmes, set out to promote it. Empathy requires practice. I hope therefore that today you will get some practice by celebrating your graduation through the eyes of your families and friends.

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As you go forward from today, you will be continuing a journey of life-long learning, given its foundation at this university. Many of you will be the first in your family to have graduated from university and, as I look around today and contemplate your futures, I am reminded that education remains the best engine of social and economic mobility that a country can have. As you now continue your journeys, in the private, public or not-for-profit sectors, or through an entrepreneurial initiative, or in grad school, I hope that you will serve as strong **advocates for education** as a source of social mobility, economic opportunity and sustainable development. Education does not come cheap – to providers, to consumers, to governments, or to taxpayers. Yet the cost of ignorance is many times higher. So, let us all be advocates for education.

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You have been given and have seized an opportunity and are now fortunate to be graduating with a bachelor's degree from the University of Central Asia. This degree, in Computer Science, or Communications and Media, or Earth and Environmental Sciences, or Global Economics will help to open the door to future opportunities.

And yet, as the speeches of Princess Zahra Aga Khan and Dr Shams Kassim-Lakha reflect, your education at UCA has provided you with so much more than a degree in your chosen discipline. The education you have received at UCA has been designed to develop the capacity of your mind and the quality of your thought.

We have promoted critical thinking, intellectual self-reliance, the knowledge of how to learn and the passion for wanting to learn.

We have taught you to embrace difference and diversity, to debate and discuss, to disagree agreeably.

We have sought to empower you to organise your thoughts and to garner evidence in an analytical, innovative and honest manner.

We have equipped you with the tools to distinguish the true, from the apparently true, the claimed to be true and the not so true.

And, in doing all of this, we have demanded that you think about *who* you want to be and not simply what you want to be.

These are the qualities that you will come to appreciate you have acquired alongside your degree. These are the qualities that you will need to sustain and thrive in a world in which the pace of change has never been faster but will likely never again be slower. And these are also the qualities that sustainable economies, successful societies and resilient environments will increasingly call upon in a world defined by rapid change, increasing uncertainty, the pervasive rise of populism and growing conflict.

In this context, it has never been more important for universities to represent and insist upon respect for truth, faith in the power of reason and belief in the value of **evidence-based, informed decision making**. This is what the best universities do. This is what UCA does. And, as our graduates, we now call on you to help distinguish fact from fiction, truth from falsehood and to make the case for reasoned argument backed by evidence and underscored by honesty and integrity. If you can do this, you will make a difference and you will change the world.

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Graduates, you have shown extraordinary resilience, learned new skills, shown compassion for each other and our university community and you emerge as young men and women of whom we are all proud. As you make your way in your careers and your lives, practice **empathy** in all your relationships, **advocate for education**, universities (especially UCA) and life-long learning; and most of all, demand that **reasoned truth and empirical evidence** provide the basis for your decision-making.

Congratulations once again and thank you.