

University of Central Asia Convocation 2025
Address by Professor Christopher J Gerry
Rector

Chancellor, His Highness the Aga Khan

Honourable Ministers;

Honourable Governors;

Chair and Members of the Board of Trustees;

Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences.

Faculty and staff of the University

Parents, partners, friends and family members.

Distinguished guests....

AND...of course, most especially the graduates of the Class of 2025:

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Good morning Naryn, Good morning Khorog.

First and foremost, I would like to offer my congratulations to all of you – graduates, your family and friends and to our faculty. Sixty five UCA graduates, 37 in Naryn, 28 in Khorog. 21 computer scientists, 16 graduates of communications and media, 14 Economists, and 14 earth and environmental scientists. You proudly represent the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Russia and to have completed your degree and call yourself a graduate of the University of Central Asia is an extraordinary achievement.

For you, today is a celebration of that achievement. For me, it is equally a celebration of connection: the unique, deep, personal, and enduring connections that this university builds with its students – and those you have built with each other.

As Rector, I have the privilege – and sometimes the emotional challenge – of watching each of you arrive, grow, occasionally struggle, often surprise yourselves, and ultimately walk across this stage with clarity, confidence and a sense of purpose. That transformation is never purely academic – it is profoundly human. And today is a moment to honour all that you have achieved and all that you have become.

In the spirit of connection, I want to speak to you today not as the head of an academic institution, but as a member of a community – one I know *you* will always remain a part of.

Let me start by telling you a story.

A few years ago, a quiet student from At-Bashy – a small village in Naryn – took a courageous step. His English was limited, but his mind was sharp, and his interest in climate change and mathematics was already stirring. He took the plunge and enrolled in a two-week UCA summer school in Naryn, focusing on intensive maths and English.

That small decision – that summer programme – opened a door. The introduction to critical thinking, the inspiration drawn from our fantastic faculty – well done, Roza Kazakbaeva and Ian Canlas – changed the course of his life.

Some of you surely know him. His name is Nurlan Nogoibaev.

Nurlan went on to found the Music Club on campus, played the komuz, and graduated with a UCA degree in Computer Science. He now lives in Paris, working as an aerospace data scientist, designing climate-optimized flight paths to reduce global aviation emissions. And next year, he hopes to begin an MSc in Technology Policy at the University of Cambridge.

Despite these remarkable achievements, perhaps the most powerful thing I can say about Nurlan is this: he remains connected. Connected to where he came from. Connected to the values that shaped him. He continues to host online lectures for students in his home village of At-Bashy — a quiet, unassuming act of mentorship and service.

Now, when I first wrote this speech, I didn't realise something important: Nurlan is here with us today – even more connected than I had imagined. Nurlan, would you please stand and take a bow?

For me, this is UCA at its very best: excellence without arrogance, and ambition grounded in community. It is connection — across places, across people, across time — expressed not just in grand gestures, but in small, meaningful acts.

And, Dear graduates, each of you carries your own version of Nurlan's story.

Whether you arrived from the Pamirs or the Tien Shan, from Bishkek, Almaty, Dushanbe, or across the borders and mountains that UCA was created to bridge – you came here with hope.

You brought different languages, beliefs, cultures, and life experiences. But what you leave with is something hard-won — and shared: resilience, confidence, friendship, a belief in the future, a sense of purpose and meaning, and a set of lifelong connections.

You've learned how to write a thesis, solve a differential equation, switch between online, offline, and hybrid learning. You've pitched ideas, debated the ethics of AI, and learned to think critically.

But more than that, you've learned how to live together. To listen, to disagree – and to still respect each other. You've learned to laugh, to cry, and to stand *with* one another in the face of complexity and challenge.

That is connection. And, in many ways, represents the heart of your education.

This was illuminated for me in recent conversations with seniors on both campuses and with alumni in Dushanbe. And, as Rector, this is what makes me proudest. It is not just your academic success – impressive though that is. It is your character that will hold you in good stead and will light the path ahead: your humour, your humility, your ambition to lead and to serve, and your obvious kindness.

Let me also say this plainly: we know UCA isn't perfect – at least, not yet! We are a young university – and like you, still learning, growing, and evolving. And, in this journey, we are deeply grateful to you for your patience, your ideas, your feedback, and your resilience in the face of so many unanticipated and unprecedented challenges.

You really have helped us see where we must do better. You've shown us how to teach and learn differently, how to listen more attentively, and how to shape a university experience that truly prepares students for the world as it is, as it should be, and as it could be.

And let me assure you now, UCA will continue to grow through collaboration, connection and partnership, not just procedure and policy. We will build this university *with* our students and faculty, not just for them. Through connection, not separation. Your voices, your lived experiences, and your insights will shape us, and will remain central to who we are and who we will become. That's not just a promise, nor a platitude, for today's ceremony – it is my guiding principle for the years ahead.

At UCA, our mission goes beyond awarding degrees – we are here to build futures: for you, your families and communities, and for this remarkable region. That means equipping you with the tools to thrive in the economy of tomorrow, yes – but equally, it means nurturing you as stewards of our fragile mountain ecosystems, champions of local prosperity, and leaders in climate adaptation, mitigation and resilience.

And make no mistake, you are graduating into a world full of challenges. Yes – graduates – the climate crisis, economic shifts, digital transformation, unstable politics and pervasive social divisions. But my strong belief, my enduring faith, is that *you* are also – finally – the generation that will bring both the competence *and* the compassion necessary to respond.

Whether you choose to stay in Central Asia, venture abroad, or do both – as Nurlan has – you carry with you a responsibility and a relationship – a connection. This university will always be yours. You are not just alumni. To UCA, you are now lifelong partners – connected with us, in the shared work of making this region richer, stronger, smarter, fairer, and greener – with UCA at the heart of that journey.

Let me close with this. As we mark the launch of UCA's 25th anniversary year, we are reminded that our mission isn't about buildings – it's about belonging. You belong here. Not just to this physical place, but to a story that stretches, connecting us, from the glaciers of the Pamirs to the mountain paths of the Tien Shan, to the streets of Paris – and back again.

So, here's my message to you, Class of 2025:

- Let your ambition remain big.
- Let your values remain strong.
- And let your connection—to each other, to UCA, the faculty that inspired you, and to Central Asia – be lifelong.
- We are proud of what you've accomplished.
- We are thankful for what you've taught us.
- And we are excited for the future that we'll shape together.

Congratulations Class of 2025 and thank you.