

ADDRESS BY PRINCESS ZAHRA AGA KHAN, UCA TRUSTEE
AT THE 2024 GRADUATION CEREMONY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA

15 JUNE 2024

Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim

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;

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

Chairman Shams Kassim-Lakha and members of the Board of Trustees.

Acting Rector Christopher Gerry; Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences Maxim Khomyakov; and UCA faculty and staff.

Donors, partners, volunteers, and friends of UCA.

Parents, family members, distinguished guests, and, especially,

Graduates of the Class of 2024:

Convocation is a joyous moment in the life of a university—both a significant milestone and the start of a new journey for its graduands. While I regret that I am not with you in person, I am grateful for the opportunity to convey my own heartfelt congratulations and the happiness and pride of our Chancellor, His Highness the Aga Khan, in your accomplishments.

You should be very proud of those accomplishments. As the University of Central Asia is a young institution—not much older than the members of the Class of 2024!—your achievements not only set a high bar for future students, but also strengthen our ability to fulfil our mission. I know you will join the Chancellor and I in thanking the many individuals and institutions who contributed to your UCA experience: our remarkable faculty and staff, parents and family members, and our donors, volunteers, partners and friends across the globe. We remain grateful as well to the governments of UCA's Founding States, who have created the enabling environment in which the University continues to thrive.

I cannot think of a more inspiring setting for your celebration today than the high mountain regions of Central Asia. The breathtaking natural surroundings of UCA's campuses, however, provide much more than a scenic backdrop. They encourage us to reflect on the integral connection between the University's mission, its distinctive educational experience, and the environment in which it is situated.

That reflection is important, for amidst the well-deserved celebrations, many of you may also have trepidations about your journey. We see the enduring effects of a global pandemic, geopolitical conflicts, economic volatility, and societal fractures. We see rising mistrust of established norms and institutions at a time when the climate crisis requires coordinated actions to protect the health of our planet and the quality of life on it. And we see the outsized impacts of these uncertain times in the regions that UCA serves.

While I understand those fears, I remain confident that UCA has prepared you well for this moment. My faith is grounded in the Chancellor's founding vision and mission for the University of Central Asia; in UCA's embrace of interdisciplinarity, experiential learning, research, innovation, and community service—and, through these, ensuring its faculty, students, and graduates play a central role in fostering a vibrant and more inclusive global knowledge society.

In a "knowledge society", intellectual capital is the most powerful generator of prosperity and improvement of quality of life—more than conventional measures of land, labour, raw materials, physical or financial capital. Simply put, the greatest resources a society can possess are the creativity and ingenuity of its peoples. All societies require knowledge production, and knowledge has always played an important role in the rise of prosperity and social well-being. But, too often, societies face multiple barriers to unlocking full potential of their intellectual capital and to participating in global knowledge networks.

Access to higher education is one critical component of a knowledge society. Equally important is the nature of the research and learning: it is no longer sufficient for a university to train narrow specialists or prepare graduates for employment today. That is why UCA's undergraduate programme encourages inter-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary, and experiential learning and knowledge integration.

Regardless of your chosen field of computer science, environmental science, economics, or communications, as a UCA graduate, you have gained powerful capacities for critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and constructive engagement with difference. You possess knowledge of the natural world, of both the potential and threats of communication technologies, of the institutions that govern modern societies, and of the historical, economic, and geopolitical contexts in which those institutions exist.

It will require the united efforts of knowledge societies across the globe to address the urgent challenges of climate change and environmental degradation—and to improve quality of life

for all people on the planet. I have tremendous faith that our newest UCA graduates will be at the forefront of those efforts.

The world of work is changing rapidly, and all professionals need to update their knowledge, competencies, and skills on a regular basis. I hope that your UCA experience has instilled in all of you a curiosity and life-long commitment to learning, and that you can look to our School of Professional and Continuing Education—which has trained some 250,000 learners to date—when you continue your educational journey. Similarly, I suspect that, through its pathbreaking research, outreach, and future master’s programmes the Graduate School of Development may serve as a point of reconnection to UCA for many of you.

However you choose to do so, I hope that UCA remains an important touchstone for your life and work. Draw support from your former classmates and small but mighty alumni community. Seek inspiration from the knowledge, resilience, and diversity of Central Asia’s peoples. Keep those majestic mountains in mind as you seek ways to apply your own talents to protecting the health of our planet and quality of life on it.

As you step into the world, know that you do not just carry a degree from the University of Central Asia – you carry a mantle of responsibility and the hope of many. May you lead with courage, act with compassion, and inspire those around you to join in your quest to create a better world.

Thank you.