

## Agreement Signed to Support Vulnerable Youth in Kyrgyzstan



Talantbek Egemberdiev (left), and Dilovar Butabekov, signing the agreement to support vulnerable youth in Kyrgyzstan.

To provide educational support to vulnerable youth in Kyrgyzstan, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed on February 26th 2021 between the Agency for Primary Vocational Education under the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic, and UCA's School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPCE).

The MOU was signed by Agency Director, Talantbek Egemberdiev, and SPCE Director

Dilovar Butabekov in Bishkek. It aims to provide vulnerable youth with additional education to ensure work in professions of the future, contribute to the development of the economy, and increase the population's employment rate. The Local Impact Project would grant these youth (ages 18-28) access to existing SPCE courses.

Over the next two years, 45 privileged slots will be allocated to graduates of the

Agency's professional lyceums to study in an SPCE training center. Twenty-three slots will be allotted for 2021 in the northern region of the Kyrgyz Republic, and 22 slots for 2022 in the southern region in the following areas: Entrepreneurship, Information Technology, and English language. Admissions will be on a competitive basis, and students will be provided accommodation, meals, and travel expenses during the course of study.

## SPCE Learning Centre Opens in Kabul

UCA's School of Professional and Continuing Education learning centre in Kabul, Afghanistan, formally opened on February 21st 2021, with school officials and institutional partners hailing it as an important step towards helping the local population secure their future.

Ambassador Sheherzade Hirji, diplomatic representative of the Aga Khan Development Network in Kabul, said the center will be "an intersection between technology and physical learning," which can help places like Kabul address the growing challenges of urbanization and mass migration.

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At the opening ceremony of the SPCE Centre in Kabul L to R: Najeebullah Musafirzada (AKES), Aitmadi Amirbaig (National Council), Sheherzade Hirji (AKDN), Dilovar Butabekov (UCA-SPCE) and Najmuddin Najm (AKF-A).



# Mega Projects and Conflict Resolution in Mountain Communities

When the primary motivation of business is profit, the rights of people can often be ignored, or even violated. It is not surprising that when large-scale infrastructure projects come to town, the quality of life of the local people is often at risk. The University of Central Asia (UCA) is helping give voice to the people.

A case in point is the mining sector in Kyrgyzstan, which in the past has had a poor track record of protecting the environment and the livelihood of local communities. As a result, investments in the extractive industry have not always led to a win-win situation for both investors and local communities.

Kyrgyzstan is a small mountainous republic in Central Asia endowed with significant deposits of gold. However, since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, it has barely benefited from its natural resource wealth and remains one of the poorest countries in the region. Despite being identified as a strategic priority by political leaders, the country's mining sector has stagnated over the decades and contributes only 10% of the country's overall GDP.

The efforts of the Kyrgyz government to develop the mining sector presents socio-political and environmental challenges that often trigger resource conflicts between communities and foreign investors. The University of Central Asia's Institute



*A member of UCA's team interviewing residents about the impact of mining activities near their village.*



*A mining site in Ala Buka, Kyrgyzstan.*

of Public Policy and Administration (IPPA) has teamed up with the University of Oxford and the Independent Research Institute of Mongolia to address these challenges and foster trust, transparency, and cooperation between all stakeholders. With funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) and Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), the collaborative [project](#) "Gobi Framework for Sustainable Infrastructure Partnerships" is pioneering a dispute resolution model that seeks to ensure a peaceful social fabric and inclusive economic development.

Not only is the team of researchers investigating the root sources of mining conflict in Kyrgyzstan, but they are developing tools to enhance the capacity of communities and government to minimise the negative impacts of infrastructure projects. One such solution is the delivery of complex knowledge products on mining-related issues to local stakeholders in a relevant and accessible way through a mobile application platform. Kemal

Toktomushev, Senior Research Fellow at IPPA and Co-Principal Investigator of the project, explains: "A good investment climate is not solely about creating favourable conditions for private investors to generate profit. A good investment climate is about creating favourable conditions for all actors to prosper, including the improvement of the quality of life of local communities and the provision of the welfare effects of mining to all affected constituencies."

The need to find a new path, which combines economic growth and investment with social inclusion, is crucial for political stability in Kyrgyzstan, and the University of Central Asia is playing a key role by promoting dialogue with local communities and using its academic and research platform as a catalyst for change. A related research paper from UCA's Institute of Public Policy and Administration, available for free [download](#) from their website, is [Addressing Local Conflicts in the Kyrgyz Republic's Mining Industry: A Holistic Approach](#).

## Prestigious New Appointment for Head of SPCE Naryn

Nurbek Nisharapov, Head of SPCE Naryn, who was also serving on the Board of Trustees (BoT) of Naryn State University (NSU), was elected by its members to serve as Chairman of the BoT in February. Nurbek, a native of Naryn, has been associated with UCA's School of Professional and Continuing Education in Naryn since 2011, and was promoted to head the School in 2016. Congratulations to Nurbek on this prestigious appointment at NSU, which is a reflection of the esteem in which his talents and abilities are held.



# Everyday Aesthetics Can Help Build a Culture of Empathy and Dialogue



Dr. Michael Garbutt of the University of South Wales in Sydney discusses *The Playful Eye* event held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in August 2020.

Art and anthropological researchers at a recent UCA online event pushed for a re-thinking of aesthetic experiences beyond the appreciation of artwork promoted by museums, into one that engages more with the world and is a “highly productive experience” that allows one to discover “the whole, and the other.”

Art-centered aesthetics is not only narrow and arbitrary, but it also creates “hierarchical conditions in society,” said Dr. Soheil Ashrafi, Acting Associate Dean and Chair of UCA School of Arts and Sciences’ Department of Communications and Media. He referenced French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, whereby those who recognize beauty in art and possess knowledge and skills about it are somehow deemed as belonging to a high culture, allowing them to move up the social ladder.

Ashrafi spoke at the public research talk, *Beyond the Art Museum, Towards a Theory and Practice of Everyday Aesthetics*, held via Zoom February 12, 2021, along with fellow researchers and academics Dr. Michael Garbutt of the University of South Wales in Sydney, Australia, and Altyn Kapalova, artist, cultural anthropologist and research fellow at the Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit of UCA’s Graduate School of Development.

The everyday aesthetics that he, Garbutt and Kapalova are proposing in their research is one where experience takes precedence over concept, said Ashrafi,

who walked participants through the history of aesthetics and the various schools of thought that have emerged from it. “Concept is always given to us, while experience is always unfolding, it’s always something new,” he explained, adding that this view is a throwback to the origins of aesthetics in ancient Greece. It is one that looks into questions such as, “How do we sense the world? How do we perceive the world without polluting ourselves with concepts?”

Everyday aesthetics not only liberates one “from the politico-economic constraints of beauty and taste” dictated by the art-centered aesthetics “and the lingering discursive legacy of high culture and the global north,” but it can also foster a culture of empathy and dialogue, said Ashrafi. “It is in that perceptual, experiential moment when you come upon the other that you develop and understand the other.”

Garbutt, who is a senior lecturer at USW’s faculty of design and architecture, spoke about how their UCA-funded research on everyday aesthetics has focused on an experimental, participatory art practice event – *The Playful Eye* – which was held in association with the Osh Museum of Fine Arts in September 2020, and with the National Museum of Art in Bishkek in August 2020. He explained *The Playful Eye* as a way of discovering and engaging with art through play, through the eyes of a child where everything is imbued with a sense of wonder. “As adults, we need to rediscover play as a way of engaging with art and the world.” Garbutt also an-

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## SPCE Learning Center Opens in Kabul

Aitmadi Amirbaig, President of the National Council, made a similar observation, noting that while 60-75% of Afghanistan’s population live in villages, about 3-5% migrate to cities every year in search of jobs and opportunities. He noted that plans for the center began more than four years ago, as part of National Council’s Strategy Roadmap for Education in Afghanistan.

Prof. Dr. S. Sohail H. Naqvi, UCA Rector, who spoke via Zoom from Bishkek, congratulated SPCE-Afghanistan for introducing the CATS Programme as an online course. “Today it is a running success, and is a great example of AI programs piloted in Afghanistan.” He added that the opening of the centre “is the result of the collective efforts of AKDN organizations and their support.”

Dr. Najmuddin Najm, CEO of Aga Khan Foundation-Afghanistan praised the efforts of UCA in taking education to marginalized learners, noting that while institutions normally begin their operations from major cities, UCA began from remote areas. “UCA and SPCE have started a trend which brings hope to marginalized populations, and is constantly evolving in search of new challenges.”

Also participating in the ceremony were Dilovar Butabekov, Director of UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education, and other senior staff and heads of AKDN agencies.

nounced that UCA has agreed to manage a major international conference linked to their research, the 7th International Conference on Trans-disciplinary Imaging in Bishkek in October 2022.

Jyldyz Sarieva, a UCA Communication and Media student who is one of three assistants involved in the research, introduced Project Skylark, which will showcase the visual culture and arts of Central Asia through a web platform. The proposal, which is another component of the research, also aims to build connections between Central Asian artists and the broader world of international artists and appreciators.

# Experts Highlight Rise in Domestic Violence During Covid-19

Government agencies should do more to protect society's most vulnerable citizens during the pandemic, according to panelists at two online events hosted by UCA's Civil Society Initiative, which looked at domestic violence during the lockdown and the impact of Covid-19 on the educational system.

Perpetrators of domestic violence should be arrested, and government agencies should do more to protect women and children, according to panelist Altyn Kapalova, UCA research fellow and gender expert, at [an event](#) held on February 19th 2021 via Internet-television Govori TV.

"Violence against children is directly linked to violence against women. Children who see their mothers being beaten are exposed to strong psychological violence," said Kapalova. She said the existing 15 crisis centers are unable to cope with the huge number of women subjected to domestic violence.

"State agencies do not protect women," said Kapalova, noting that law enforcement agencies do not arrest perpetrators. While women are forced to hide in crisis centers with their children, perpetrators go unpunished, she noted. Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Interior Affairs has reported that domestic violence cases rose by 65% during the quarantine period last year. More than a dozen adolescents have also committed suicide, it added.

Other panelists at the event were Darika Asylbekova - founder of the "Ak Zhurok"



Illustration: [www/pikisuperstar](http://www.pikisuperstar)

crisis center in Osh; Munara Beknazarova, human rights defender of "Aikyn Bagit" public organization; Tynchtyk Bakytov, a psychologist; and Baktygul Chynybaeva, journalist from Azattyk radio.

Meanwhile, at the second event held February 8th 2021, Kyrgyz educators emphasized the need to provide Internet access to remote regions of the country to deliver online learning as the ongoing pandemic continues to disrupt social interactions, including face-to-face schooling.

"It is crucial to build a system of partnership in the context of existing online programmes, to have ready-made platforms that can be used for further online education processes, and solve the issues of Internet access to remote regions of

the country", said Elena Munduzbaeva, Director of Bilimkana School.

Dogdurgul Kenderbayeva, Advisor to the Minister of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic underlined the importance of a teacher's willingness to self-learn and to have the necessary gadgets for online instruction. "During the pandemic, many teachers were trained in the format of online-teaching and how to communicate with students via screens."

Full discussion in Russian on [Facebook](#).

Both events are part of the project "Increasing access to comprehensive and reliable information on Coronavirus for journalists in Kyrgyzstan", supported by the British Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic.

## Aga Khan Humanities Project

### Cross Debate Format Training and Tournament Registration is Open

Cross Debate Format (CDF) is a new and innovative debate format aimed at identifying topical problems, prioritizing them, and debating to find the most applicable solutions through three positions. It is a tool to examine the problem through the prism of culture/history, rational choice/economics, and construct scenarios/politics.

UCA's AKHP plans to conduct a series of online training in Kyrgyzstan and

Kazakhstan and hold a regional Central Asian Tournament in 2021. The next online training and mini-tournament will be held during March 20-27, 2021 (3 day-training, 4-hours a day).

By the end of the training, participants will receive a UCA Certificate and become a potential participant of the Central Asian Debate Tournament-2021.

If you are fluent in English and want to

improve your critical and analytical skills, reading and arguing techniques, structuring and logically presenting your ideas, and getting to know debaters from other regions of Tajikistan, we encourage you to participate in this regional tournament. Please register for the training by March 15, 2021.

Learn more about CDF in this [video](#).

[Register here](#)

## UCA Students Urged to Benefit from E-commerce Platform

E-Commerce is not just meant for big businesses, even ordinary people can achieve success and potentially reach a global market by using it as a platform for their goods and services, said Murad Wadhwanja, Product Lead Director at LinkedIn, during an online UCA public lecture held February 4th 2021.

Wadhwanja encouraged UCA students to look at how they can benefit from the e-commerce value chain while still in school, citing that since the whole process involves a lot of steps, businesses are always on the lookout for people who can do work offline. He provided examples of how educated professionals from developing economies help e-commerce businesses with marketing and other services. Listing products online is a tedious endeavour, for instance, and since labour costs in North American are high, they often look elsewhere to do this work.

E-commerce is not going anywhere but up, stressed Wadhwanja, noting that while retail sales typically grows at 3-4% annually, it has been 15% with e-commerce. In 2020, the pandemic pushed its growth to 44%, he said. By the end of 2020, global sales reached \$4 trillion.

“The trend will continue...It doesn’t matter which part of the world... Once people experience the comfort (of shopping online), they get used to it,” said Wadhwanja, who has over 20 years of experience with e-commerce space and customer opera-

Why eCommerce?

<b>\$4T</b>  Global Online Sales	<b>2Billion</b>  2B digital buyers	<b>15%</b>  eCommerce Growth in USA	<b>69%</b>  Americans shop online	<b>95%</b>  Online Commerce by 2040
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tions, including at Amazon, where he led multi-billion-dollar businesses and was involved in building its online grocery delivery service, Amazon Fresh.

NASDAQ predicts that by 2040, 95% of commerce will be online, said Wadhwanja, adding, “either we watch this trend happen, or use it to our benefit.”

Who are shopping online? Millennials are driving growth, with 60% of them making purchases online, noting that they comprise 2/3 of Amazon’s customer base. Generation Z, the demographic cohort succeeding millennials, are predict-

ed to be twice more likely to only shop on e-commerce and brand websites.

Wadhwanja also offered success stories of ordinary people to prove his point that anyone can take advantage of e-commerce: a watch importer in Texas who had to close his store during the pandemic opened one online, and in a few months he built a brand and is now selling in 30 countries; an ethnic restaurant in Atlanta signed up to various online delivery services and has not only maintained its customer base, but seen tremendous growth.

Watch the public lecture here: [https://youtu.be/Gck-eGwY\\_m0](https://youtu.be/Gck-eGwY_m0)

## UCA Student Clubs Continue Community Service During the Pandemic

The Covid-19-related lockdown in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan has not put a damper on the willingness and ability of UCA student clubs to work independently and link up with other groups in order to serve their community.

The Razakar Club, set up boxes in every UCA dorm block for donations of clothes to families in need and to the local Crisis Center. The Enactus Club members are once again helping high school graduates prepare for UCA admission exams by implementing peer-to-peer learning online under their “Drive Your Mind Bravely” project. They are currently teaching

English, Essay Writing, Math and Logic to students from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. This year’s learning, which began in early February 2021, takes place six times a week throughout a five-week period. At least six students currently conduct distance teaching to seven students.

The Eco-Warriors Club, starting in September 2020, have conducted two-day eco-educational trainings for 120 participants and installed 288 bins in nine schools, three colleges, the Mayor’s Office, and the government administration office in Naryn City. A recycling mural,



Eco Warriors prepare to distribute recycling boxes to schools in Naryn.

which depicts a young boy in the act of recycling, was also painted in Naryn town.

# How Belt and Road Initiative Impacts Natural Hazards in Mountain Communities

An environmental impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has received scant attention but may be more significant for Central Asia, is the effect of mountain road development on natural hazards, said Prof. Roy Sidle, who heads UCA's Mountain Societies Research Institute, during an online public lecture on February 24th, 2021.

While loss of biodiversity, increased emissions from road traffic, and impacts of wildlife habitat and migration corridors resulting from the BRI are popular issues globally, Sidle said it is equally important to look at how it affects populations in the mountains of Central Asia. "This is where people live, congregate, and travel, and the roads are often linked to stream and river systems." He said at his lecture, *Dark Clouds Over the Silk Road: Sustainability Issues Facing Mountainous Central Asia*.

Potential hazards resulting from road construction that could affect travelers include landslide and debris flows, rockfall, rockslides, snow avalanches, permafrost melting and glacial hazards, water inundation in valley bottoms, to name a few. This could result in road blockages, road damage, property damage, injuries, and deaths, he said.

Central Asian nations bordering China, on which the BRI is happening, must ensure that the impacts of road construction are minimized, said Sidle, who is a professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences at the UCA campus in Khorog, Tajikistan.



"Governments must insist that roads are properly located, designed and maintained, with attention to reducing the connectivity of roads to streams, which will reduce sediment delivery, flood potential, and downstream impacts," he said. Sidle also said governments must work to minimize the socio-economic impacts of BRI. These include reducing foreign traffic into remote regions to minimize disruptions to traditional land management and reduce the spread of disease. Transmission of communicable diseases in Central Asia's poor, far-flung areas via the transportation corridors has been flagged as a critical issue, noting that like other indigenous people from Amazonia, those who live in secluded areas, are more susceptible to disease brought in by outsiders.

Other issues raised by researchers, said Sidle, include concerns that with resource

exploitation and extractive activities, there will be forfeiture of mining and land rights, and a disruption of traditional land management practices. Very few BRI projects employ locals and there has been evidence from initial BRI investments that show little economic gain in Kyrgyzstan because of debt dependency from large Chinese loans.

While BRI supporters cite benefits, such as new internal and external markets, enhanced cross-border tourism, lower shipping costs and support for hydropower, these do not come "without strings attached," said Sidle. Governments must examine all potential impacts, not just short-term gains, he added.

Watch the public lecture here: <https://youtu.be/ivH52i3sYds>

## Good to Know

### UCA Offers Free Live-streamed Courses in Economics

UCA's Institute of Public Policy and Administration (IPPA), in cooperation with the Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education's Economics Institute (CERGE-EI) Foundation, is hosting live-streamed economic courses in March and April 2021. Courses are being delivered online from CERGE-EI's Digital Media Center in Prague, and coordinated by UCA from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to allow live streaming to multiple locations.

Courses are offered free to those with knowledge of advanced BA or introductory MA level of Economics, and includes Behavioral Economics, Development Economics, Energy Economics and Climate Policy, Experimental Economics, and Health Economics. All courses are conducted in six week modules, with exams scheduled in the seventh week.



## SPCE Students Help Raise Awareness About Cancer in Afghanistan



Participants of the Cancer Awareness Workshop.

The Continuing Education Unit (CEU) of UCA's School of Professional and Continuing Education learning centre in Faizabad, Afghanistan, commemorated World Cancer Day on February 4th 2021, with an awareness-raising workshop. Twenty-five students participated in the event, which was held in cooperation with the American Council Alumni and the Panexe Logistic Service Company.

About to Over 20,000 Afghans are diagnosed with cancer every year, and about 15,000 of them die in the same year, according to the World Health Organisa-

tion. Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the country and is the second most common cause of death for Afghan women after maternal mortality.

An initiative created in 2000 by the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC), World Cancer Day aims to raise worldwide awareness, improve education and catalyse personal, collective and government action "to reimagine a world where millions of preventable cancer deaths are saved and access to life-saving cancer treatment and care is equal for all - no matter who you are or where you live."

## SPCE Student Wins More Honours



Congratulations to Havobegim Qurbonmamdova, who won first place in a regional Olympiad among public schools of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region in Tajikistan. Havobegim, who is studying high level English, Math, and ICT at UCA's School of Professional and Continuing Education, is celebrating her second top prize win in this competition.

A 9th grade student at public school number 9 in Khorog, Havobegim began studying at SPCE while in the 7th grade. She has become unstoppable since then, and recently also won second place in the Republican Spelling Bee contest.

## Donors Sponsor Students at SPCE-Tekeli

Thirty-four students of UCA's School of Professional and Continuing Education in Tekeli (Kazakhstan) have received sponsorships in the form of a 15% tuition discount. In total 210,000 tenges (KZT) was raised to provide this support through the city branch of the National Chamber of Entrepreneurs of the Republic of Kazakhstan "Atameken". Sponsorships were offered to schoolchildren from large families, and to families where one child is already studying at SPCE. Parents were grateful for the support during this difficult period of the pandemic when many families are unable to afford extra expenses for their children's supplementary education.



Zauye Koishan kyzy, mother of six children, proudly displays her sponsorship certificate.

## Sky's the Limit for Two Former SPCE Students



Nurmuhammad Butabekov (front left), an Economics student at UCA in Khorog, also works as a Math and English tutor in the community.



Gulazor Gulmamadova attributes much of her success to AKDN and SPCE.

Gulazor Gulmamadova and Nurmuhammad Butabekov are two former students of UCA's School of Professional and Continuing Education who are on different career and life paths, but nonetheless have a similar passion and drive to make the most of the opportunities they have been given in order to help their communities.

Gulmamadova holds three degrees from some of the most prestigious academic institutions in Central Asia and the UK. Her diverse academic experience reflects her qualities as "a curious and tenacious person," said Gulmamadova, who credits her student years in Kyrgyzstan for helping shape her life. Her journalism education pushed her to advocate for women's rights and gender equality, and to explore the role of religion, particularly Islam, in

the lives of Muslim majority countries.

"I also owe many of my achievements in life to AKDN in general, and SPCE in particular," she said, noting that they have had "a tremendous impact on my academic and personal life." Gulmamadova took the PGPP and Business Planning courses at the SPCE in Khorog, Tajikistan, where she met "amazing instructors who not only taught us the subjects, but also embedded their energy, confidence and optimism in us." The PGPP course helped her get high scores in IELTS, which enabled her to pursue two degrees in the U.K.

For Butabekov, the AAP program he took at SPCE "played a crucial role" in preparing him for the entrance exam at the University of Central Asia, where he is now

an Economics Student (Class of 2024), and helped him win the regional Olympiads and other local competitions. The AAP program is "very unique, and I sincerely recommend it for youth who are striving for self-development," he said.

Butabekov has big plans for himself and his community. These days, apart from studying, he has been working as an English and Math tutor to 73 students. "I look forward to carrying on the knowledge and passing it to the younger generation, and I expect them to become great people in the future."

After completing his bachelor and master's degree, Butabekov plans to develop a social entrepreneurship program in the Pamirs so he can contribute to Tajikistan's economy.

UCA Publication: Free Download

### New CHHU Publication on the Geographic History of Kyrgyzstan

UCA's Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit has a new publication: *The History of Geographic Study of Kyrgyzstan from Ancient Times till the Mid-19th Century*. Based on archival research, published scientific works, and unpublished manuscripts, it gives an overview of the knowledge of the region by ancient authors, Chinese travellers European, Arab, and Central Asian geographers, and Russian researchers.

View or [download](#).



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# Covid-19 Pandemic: UCA Students Reflect on Lessons Learned

Meeting friends, going out for walks, playing sports, and talking freely with others – it’s the simple things in life that four UCA students from the Naryn and Khorog campuses are looking forward to the most – post-pandemic.

A year ago on March 11, 2020, along with the rest of the world, the lives of Rauf Alibakhshov, Aizada Berdibekova, Farzona Akhmedova and Ubaid Sayedi were disrupted when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic.

*“These tough times have made us vigilant, and motivated young people to be strong and help each other.”*  
— Aizada

The students had been looking forward to an active and exciting life on campus. Instead, like many others worldwide, they were sent home on March 20th and classes pivoted online as part of government efforts to contain the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

While their generation may be digital natives, they soon realized that learning via an electronic device posed unanticipated challenges. When online classes began, it was “quite arduous to adapt,” said Rauf. Being in front of her laptop nearly all day long had a negative impact on Farzona’s well-being. She also had frequent issues with her Internet connection, adding to her frustration. Ubaid missed the interpersonal communication with his instructors and classmates the most, especially on a residential campus such as UCA. “Students always need each other’s support both during and after classes,” he said, adding that it was hard to have an exchange of ideas on a virtual platform.

As time passed, they all became used to distance learning. “At this stage, I feel comfortable being engaged in it,” said Rauf. He credits UCA’s faculty and staff for helping him to adjust. “Even though classes were online, we still interacted with the professors via e-mail about concerns and questions, to which they responded quickly.” Still, they all can’t wait for things to go back to “normal.”

With non-essential travel restricted, Ubaid, who is an Earth and Environmental Science student, was unable to work in a lab or go on field trips to fulfill the practical work required for class. He decided to use online resources, such as videos related to

*“Countries around the world helped one another to save lives during the pandemic, and that has been truly inspiring.”* — Rauf

his topics “and visually learned how they used theories and applied it in practice.” There was a time conflict with some of his instructors who were in other parts of the world, so he couldn’t reach out fully. He decided to “change my style of learning” and basically became an independent learner.

There were life lessons learned along the way too. The pandemic has “changed our life,” said Aizada, noting that people came to value family and friends, learned how to take care of themselves and others, and think about the consequences of their actions. “These tough times have made us vigilant...Watching every day how many people have died because of the pandemic has been very hard,” she said. But it has motivated the young generation “to be strong and help people.”

Farzona echoed the same sentiment, saying that the pandemic has taught “all humanity some important lessons,” including the ability to adapt to new life situations. “It also taught people to care not only about themselves, but also about their surroundings; to be more responsible.”

As for life after Covid, all four are wishing for an end to isolation and limitations, which they recognize has taken a toll on mental and physical wellbeing. Rauf wants to be able to socialize and stay fit with sports and “simply interact with others without fear of being infected.” Ubaid can’t wait go back to offline classes where “we can talk normally with each other, because we work better in groups, and think better together.” Farzona, too, wants to go back to traditional education, which she said is “more interesting, effective and informative.” She is also looking forward to “seeing and hugging my teachers, whom I have already come to love very much from our online lessons.” And wants to be surrounded by her fellow students on campus. Aizada yearns for happy sunny days, and hopes that “people will not forget that the pandemic also taught us to value “our relatives, our health, our time, the pureness of ourselves, and our souls.”



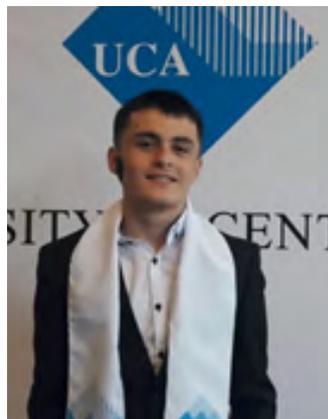
Aizada Berdibekova.



Rauf Alibakhshov.



Farzona Akhmedova.



Ubaid Sayedi.

*“Restrictions imposed because of the pandemic has made me value freedom, health, and the lives of other people.”* — Farzona

## SPCE-Faizabad Entrepreneurship Training Students Complete Their Studies



*Students learn firsthand about what it takes to open a new restaurant.*

The first group of Entrepreneurship Training Course students at UCA's School of Professional and Continuing Education learning centre in Faizabad, Afghanistan completed their one-month studies, and were awarded certificates of completion on February 18th 2021.

They learned about marketing, generating business ideas, small business management, and also visited a women-owned restaurant to learn from the experiences of actual business owners. Students distributed questionnaires and conducted interviews to help them develop a short study about Faizabad's market and discover how entrepreneurs respond to market needs.