

## Speech by Valedictorian Faryal Nayab at the SAS Graduation 2025

Your Highness Prince Rahim Aga Khan, Chancellor of the University of Central Asia,

Dr Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Chairman of UCA's Board of Trustees,

Honorable chief guests from the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan and Government of the Kyrgyz Republic,

Esteemed Trustees,

Professor Christopher Gerry, Rector of UCA,

Dr. Maxim Khomikov, Dean of UCA's School of Arts and Sciences,

Faculty, staff,

Government Representatives,

members of the Aga Khan Development Network,

family, friends, and my fellow graduates of the Class of 2025,

Hello, Asalom and Zdravstvuyte!

My name is Faryal Nayab, and it is with immense gratitude and honor that I stand before you today as the valedictorian of the University of Central Asia Class of 2025. Today, we gather not only to celebrate academic success but to honor a journey that has transformed each one of us in ways words can hardly capture.

Eleven years, two months, and twenty days ago, I left my home to study at Aga Khan higher secondary school Kuragh Chitral, back in Pakistan. I was twelve years old, a young girl stepping away not just from family, but from everything familiar and safe. I was scared. The world felt uncertain. But what I carried with me were dreams, dreams strong enough to pull me forward, even when the path was steep.

Since that day, I've been moving from place to place, always chasing opportunities, always trying to become better. I left behind my home, and for all these years, I was quietly searching for a new one. A place where I would feel rooted again and a place where I would feel belonged. And today, I'm very grateful and proud to share with you all that, I've found my home once again. I found it in a different country, among people from different cultures and languages. I found my home in this beautiful campus surrounded by pamir mountains. and it's a home I will carry in my heart for the rest of my life.

Each of us arrived here with a different story. Some of us walked from our home to reach the campus. Some of us left villages, some of us left cities, and some of us crossed borders to. We all left something behind, but what we brought with us were hopes, determination, and a willingness to grow.

Our journey wasn't always easy. We began our university journey behind screens, in the middle of a global pandemic. Our first classrooms were Team links, our classmates were faces in little boxes on the screen. Our professors taught us through unstable Wi-Fi/4G connections and our muted microphones. But the challenges didn't end there. Over the next years, there were days when we wrestled with Moodle, deadlines at 11:59 pm, assignments, and final reports. and there were also nights when we even struggled with our own self-doubts.

But somewhere between all those deadlines and doubts, we discovered just how capable we really are, and we lived the most beautiful moments of our lives. We laughed on Shirchoy nights, danced at bonfires, ran student clubs, debated in MUN committee, celebrated diversity week, took field trips and hiked through both literal and metaphorical mountains. And we did it all together!

Over these years, we cheered for each other and cried with each other. We didn't just share courses and classroom, we shared courage, creativity, and the pressure of getting it all right. Somewhere between all the reports and reflections, we became a family. We became each other's late-night editors, biggest supporters, and closest friends. We became each other's home!

Together, we learned to survive online learning, quizzes, assignments, exams, final reports and not to mention Khorog and Naryn winters!

And somewhere along the way—we also transformed!

In these years, we have seen each other evolve in extraordinary ways. I've seen friends publish research papers, present at international conferences, win grants and awards, participate in summer and winter schools, go on exchange programs, secure internships with world-class institutions like the United Nations, the World Bank, and more. And today as we are graduating, some of us have already received offers from graduate schools around the world, from top programs in Europe, North America, and Asia. correction preparing for competitive fellowships, securing jobs with major organizations, or returning to their communities equipped with new skills and a renewed sense of purpose.

As for me, I will be pursuing my graduate studies at York University, Canada in development studies. This wasn't just a decision about where to study, it was about choosing a path that aligns with the questions I began asking at UCA, and the kind of impact I hope to make in the development sector, especially in communities like ours.

We may come from four different disciplines, but what unites our achievements is not just success, it is the impact. Every one of us has grown into someone who can lead, serve, and contribute in meaningful ways. These years didn't just prepare us for the future—they shaped us for it.

But none of this, none of these memories, milestones, or transformations—would have been possible without the support of those who believed in us, even before we fully believed in ourselves.

I would like to begin by paying heartfelt tribute to UCA's Founding Chancellor, His Late Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan IV. His visionary leadership gave birth to this university—not just as a place of learning, but as a beacon of hope in the heart of our mountains. His belief in education as a force for transformation has shaped every step of our journey. Though he is no longer with us, his vision lives on, on these campuses, in the classrooms and in each one of us.

We are also grateful to our new Chancellor, His Highness Prince Rahim Aga Khan, whose leadership continues to carry that vision forward. We look to the future with confidence, knowing that his guidance will honor the past while preparing UCA to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

To the esteemed members of the Board of Trustees, thank you for your commitment to this institution. Your guidance and leadership have shaped UCA into a space where young people can dream boldly, think critically, and contribute meaningfully.

We are also deeply grateful to the governments and people of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for their continued support, especially toward international students. Your warmth and hospitality have made us feel safe, welcome, and at home. These countries became more than just places where we studied. They have become part of our story, and we will carry that kindness wherever we go!

To our faculty—thank you for challenging us, guiding us, supporting us and reminding us that asking questions is just as important as finding answers.

To our beloved Student Life team, UCA administration and staff, thank you so much for making UCA a space where we could not only learn, but live, grow, and belong. Thank you for always being there, from organizing events to coordinating logistics to simply being there when we needed support, you have made UCA a home for us!

And lastly to our families, thank you for every sacrifice, every encouraging word, and every silent prayer.

I especially want to thank my own parents—Gul Nayab Khan and Zaibun Nisa—for believing in the power of quality education and for making it possible not only for me, but also for my five sisters. Parents like them are the reason daughters like me aren't afraid to dream big. I'm also deeply grateful to Nazmin Alani and Arzina Alani, who have stood by me since the beginning of my UCA journey and have generously supported my education. I am incredibly lucky to have become a part of their family. I would also like to thank my biggest support system, my friends and especially my best friend, who is also graduating with me today. Thank you for being who you are and for being the kindest person I know!

This degree, this day, belongs to all of you as much as it does to us!

Dear Class of 2025, as we stand at the edge of this chapter, I want to say clearly that we didn't always have it together. There were times we felt lost. Times we failed. Times we doubted ourselves—our work, our purpose, even our place here.

But we showed up anyway. We kept going. We learned that growth often hides behind failure, and that resilience is built in the quiet moments when no one is watching.

Despite all those times we felt lost or fell short— my dearest friends, I want you all to know that today is the day, we have finally won. Not just through grades or awards, but in who we've become. We leave not just with degrees, but with stories, strength, and the kind of learning that stays with us far beyond the classroom.

We come from mountain communities, and we are no strangers to steep paths. But we also know that some of the most beautiful views come after the hardest climbs. We are ready to climb new heights—not alone, but together, as classmates, as friends, and as a generation that refuses to give up on the world.

Thank you, UCA, for giving us more than an education—you gave us a home, a purpose, and each other.

Congratulations, Class of 2025. We did it—and we're just getting started!