

UCA Class of 2023 Graduates with Lofty Dreams



Students relish their moments of joy and happiness following the Graduation Ceremony.

On 16 June 2023, at an elegant event held amid the picturesque mountains of the Pamirs and Tien Shen and live streamed globally, the University of Central Asia's School of Arts and Sciences celebrated its third Graduation Ceremony simultaneously at its two campuses in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan and Khorog, Tajikistan.

The event brought together graduates, parents, faculty, staff, UCA Board of Trustees and distinguished guests. The cohort of 76 graduates, dressed in graduation gowns designed to reflect the rich cultural traditions of Central Asia, received their degrees as they were cheered by their fellow students and family members. Of the graduates, the majority are women and nearly 70% come from small towns and rural areas. These graduates were admitted solely on merit from a pool of 1500 applicants.

The distinguished speakers at the Graduation Event included Princess Zahra Aga Khan; His Excellency Kanybek Imanaliev, Minister of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic; Dr. Farrukh Hudoydodzoda of the Tajik Ministry of Education and

Science; and Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Chairman of UCA's Board of Trustees. The keynote address was given by Dr. Anita Zaidi, President of the Gender Equality Division at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Princess Zahra Aga Khan also delivered a message from the UCA Chancellor, His Highness the Aga Khan. The honour of

2023 Class Valedictorian went to Wajahat Khan who majored in Global Economics from the Khorog campus and comes from an extremely remote village of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan. Excerpts of their speeches are on the following pages.

[Watch the graduation video.](#)



Graduation Ceremony at the Naryn Campus.

A Message from His Highness the Aga Khan, Chancellor of UCA

Delivered by Princess Zahra Aga Khan



Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim

Members of the Class of 2023, distinguished guests, faculty and staff, trustees, friends and supporters:

Two decades ago, the University of Central Asia was only an idea. That idea was distinctive, even unique, encompassing a multi-campus, multi-country institution located in and devoted to the development of mountain societies. It had attracted dedicated adherents and generous supporters. It possessed an enabling framework, thanks to its patrons, the Presidents of the Republic of Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Republic of Kazakhstan. These were tremendous assets that boded well for the future. But the journey from idea to reality had only just begun.

The graduation of the Class of 2023 reminds us how far we have come in the intervening years, and how much we have accomplished.

In 2006, UCA launched the School of Professional and Continuing Education to enable individuals across the region to acquire valuable skills. Since then, 220,000 people – half of them women – have completed courses in scores of subjects, from welding to accounting to cybersecurity.

In 2011, we established the Graduate School of Development to conduct research on issues important to Central Asia's future, and to build capacity within public, private, and civil society institutions. Today, with climate change posing a grave threat to the region, it is working to identify drought-resistant crops; investigating avalanche risk; supporting the development of sustainable infrastructure; examining the health impacts of climate change; and engaging community organisations in the search for solutions.

In 2016 and 2017, we inaugurated our first campuses, not in national capitals but – in accordance with the University's mission – in remote areas where they can have a decisive impact. And today, we are celebrating the third of many convocations and many milestones to come. The history of the University of Central Asia demonstrates that high ideals and bold ambitions can inspire people of diverse backgrounds to work to-

gether to improve quality of life, at home and abroad.

Graduates, Central Asia and the world face an array of challenges and opportunities. Climate change is altering the relationship between humanity and the environment. Advances in artificial intelligence are opening new horizons in the interface between humanity and technology. Globalisation is transforming relations between countries and communities as knowledge flows ever faster around the world.

Your education has prepared you to address these challenges. You have been trained in computer science, in data science, in environmental science, in economics, and in communications – each a field of vital importance. You have discovered what it means to live in a diverse community. And above all, you have learned that challenges are not to be feared but to be embraced.

In my eyes, you embody promise: the promise of a new generation, alive to new ways of collaborating, communicating, and thinking; and the promise of a new university, alert to emerging problems and eager to identify new opportunities to serve its countries. Born as the University of Central Asia was first taking shape, you are as young as the University itself. Equally bright futures lie ahead of you and your alma mater. My wish is that you will continue to draw strength and inspiration from one another for many, many decades to come.



Graduates at the Naryn Campus pose for a group photo with UCA Faculty and Board of Trustees.

Excerpts of Graduation Speeches

Princess Zahra Aga Khan

UCA Trustee



"It is a great pleasure to be here in Naryn, amid the breathtaking beauty of the Tien Shen Mountains and once again to speak to our newest graduates, both here and in the equally majestic setting of UCA's campus in Khorog. That we are able to connect our two campuses in this way reminds us of a central element of the University of Central Asia's mission: to connect people across borders and boundaries of all kinds.

"... Graduates, your years at UCA have been marked by intense and rewarding study; by moments of intellectual discovery and sudden realization; by transformative experiences outside the classroom. They were shaped as well by a global pandemic that placed daunting obstacles in your path, but it couldn't halt your progress and determination.

In your time at UCA, you forged friendships that will last a lifetime. You acquired a new sense of who you are and what you are capable of. You tried and failed, tried again and succeeded, and felt the wind of confidence fill your sails and propel you toward new challenges.

"... Decades from now, when this University has grown immensely in scope and impact, you will be able to say: I was there at the beginning. I helped to lay the foundations for the success of my alma mater. And with the education I received, I achieved things I would not have thought possible.

"Of course, you didn't reach this peak of achievement without assistance. Nor did the University as a whole. We must recognize the parents and family members of the graduates, whose hearts are deservedly full of pride today.

"We must convey our profound gratitude to our donors, volunteers, partners, and friends around the world. Without their abundant generosity and assistance, the University of Central Asia would not be sending these talented young men and women out into the world.

"Finally, we must acknowledge the governments of UCA's Founding States, who have contributed so powerfully to its success. If the University is thriving today, it is because our government partners have created an enabling environment that supports its growth and development."

[Watch the full speech.](#)

His Excellency Kanybek Imanaliev

Minister of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic



"I extend my sincere gratitude to His Highness Prince Aga Khan for his invaluable

support and wisdom in establishing this remarkable institution. This institution has already produced tangible results, most notably in Naryn, where the campus of the UCA has emerged as a crucial factor shaping the town's development.

"I am honoured to extend a warm welcome to our esteemed guests from around the world, the generous donors who have provided invaluable support to UCA and the people of Naryn.

"UCA graduates have been able to secure decent jobs and are using their knowledge of economy, environment, technology, and society to contribute to the economic prosperity and sustainability of Kyrgyzstan.

"I am truly delighted to hear about the launch of a Masters Programme in Sustainable Development and future plans for a doctoral programme.

"We deeply appreciate the collaboration to support the Naryn State University (NSU), where UCA is assisting NSU in enhancing academic programmes.

"I would like to extend my gratitude to His Highness the Aga Khan, Princess Zahra Aga Khan, Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, the members of the Board of Trustees, the dedicated UCA faculty and staff, and our esteemed guests, who are doing their best for UCA's sustainability!"

[Watch the full speech.](#)



Graduation procession at the Khorog Campus.



A beaming Rabia Faqir celebrating her success at the Khorog Campus with her host family.

Dr. Farrukh Hudoydodzoda

Head of the Department of International Relations of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan



"First of all, on behalf of myself and on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic, I would like to sincerely congratulate the graduates of the Class of 2023 for successfully graduating from the University of Central Asia, and wish them great success in their future work and education.

"At the official opening ceremony of the Khorog campus, the Founder of Peace and National Unity, the Leader of the Nation, Emomali Rahmon noted:

"The University of Central Asia in the city of Khorog is a new page in the system of higher education of the country... I believe that the activity of the newly established university is not only for the benefit of our country, but will serve to expand the multilateral cooperation of the countries of the region in the field of education".

"The University of Central Asia has had a very fruitful cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan.

"Prior to the official opening of UCA, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan signed a MoU with the UCA, which significantly contributes to the development of the educational and methodological activities of the University.

"In 2023, the University of Central Asia signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Tajik National University for cooperation in the field of geosciences, and has already established cooperation within this framework.

"The University of Central Asia and Khorog State University (KSU) named after Moyonsho Nazarshoev have conducted a number of studies in the Faculty of Economics and the Department of Geology. UCA has established at KSU four geological laboratories, opened a digital library, organized sessions on English language for 55 teachers, provided equipment to improve internet and provided about 800 books.

"I wish you all big successes in the future. Be proud and be successful."

[Watch the full speech.](#)

Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha

Chairman, UCA Board of Trustees



"On behalf of the Board of Trustees, I am delighted to welcome you to the third convocation of UCA. This is a big day. It's a day when we honour the achievements of our graduates, share in their joy, and look forward to the success and positive impact that they will make on their societies.



Shahnoza Dodikhudoeva proudly displays her UCA degree received from H.E. Kanybek Imanaliev, Minister of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic at the Naryn Campus, in the presence of Princess Zahra Aga Khan and Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha.

“Dear graduates, from today, you will no longer be our students, but you will be having an even higher status than our students, because you will be our alumni. You will therefore always remain a part of the UCA family.

“Perhaps you will return to enrol in our future postgraduate programmes, or join us as teachers, researchers, staff members and volunteers. In short, you are graduating but you are not leaving us, or your class fellows, and we look forward to our continued relationship in the future.

“On behalf of the Chancellor and the Board of Trustees, I also extend deep appreciation to the Patrons of the University – the Presidents of the Republic of Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Republic of Kazakhstan – for their valuable support of our growing institution.

“When the Founders decided to bring UCA to the mountain towns of Naryn, Khorog, and Tekeli, one of their dreams was that these towns would reinvent themselves as 'university towns'.

“...The latest initiative in this effort is the Naryn and Khorog Urban Resilience Projects. This is a partnership between the respective governments, the Swiss Secretariat for Economic Affairs and the Aga Khan Development Network. They involve new programmes focused on resilient urban planning, building the capacity of government officials, and demonstrating sustainable infrastructure investment.

“But as important as these efforts and in-

itiatives are, I believe that it is the performance of the graduates of the three Schools of UCA that will ultimately prove to be its most consequential contribution to the region. Based on their performance, I can say these graduates and their previous cohort that graduated at UCA, we are confident that they will make their mark as entrepreneurs, innovators, researchers, policymakers and leaders in many fields, including those yet to emerge as fields of work. Undoubtedly, their achievements will make all of us even more proud than we are today.

“Know that our prayers will always be there for your success.”

[Watch the full speech.](#)

Dr. Anita Zaidi

President of the Gender Equality Division at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation



“Thank you for inviting me here today.

It is such an honour to deliver this year’s commencement address.

“As I look out at you, the class of 2023, I see 76 graduates who are ready to change the world—much more so than other students your age around the world. You are the third class to graduate from this University that was built with the mission to help this region prosper. It’s such a wonderful mission. I urge you to remember it, and to strive to fulfil it wherever you go from here.

“There are enormous challenges here in Central Asia. The cruel effects of climate change are all around us and threatening to change every aspect of our lives, especially here in the high mountains. The glaciers are disappearing. More areas are turning into deserts. Farmers must grow crops with less water. Children must walk through dust storms to get to school. Floods, landslides, cyclones, droughts – all are becoming more severe and occurring more frequently.

“So, how do we adapt to this hotter future? It will take hard work. So, I say to you – serve Central Asia. Give back. Among you could be the future scientists who will invent new ways to farm, the economists who will devise how to leverage our abundant natural resources for economic prosperity, the entrepreneurs who will build new businesses and create jobs in renewable energy, the computer scientists who will develop the technology to detect extreme weather events, and the journalists who will hold our governments accountable and tell our stories to the world.

“Class of 2023, this university, your university is a truly special place. Not just for its brilliant beauty, inspiring professors, and the lifelong friendships you have forged here. It’s a place where men and women are equal. The world has not caught up to UCA.

“Class of 2023, it’s time to get started. I hope that in a few decades you don’t look back on today with mere nostalgia. I hope you marvel at how much progress you have made since. I hope you work hard, and when things get tough, I hope you persevere. I hope you apply the knowledge and experience you’ve gained at UCA to make life better for those around you, and more. I hope you answer the call to serve and use that as a guiding light.”

[Watch the full speech.](#)



Khushruz Saidibroimov receives his UCA degree at the Khorog Campus from Dr. Farrukh Hudoydodzoda, Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan, in the presence of Dean Dr. Maxim Khomyakov and Associate Dean Dr. Kholiknazar Kuchakshoiev (right).

Wajahat Khan

The Valedictorian of the Class of 2023



“As I reflect upon the journey that brought us all here, I am reminded of the power of resilience and the pursuit of knowledge. Our paths have been diverse, our backgrounds varied, but what unites us is our unwavering commitment to academic growth and excellence.

“Hailing from Hundur Yasin Valley, which is the remotest part of Gilgit Baltistan, where access to quality education was limited and the nearest schools were kilometres away.

“I was determined to get an education. To-

day, I am grateful for the opportunity to have received a good education, despite all the challenges and uncertainties.

“..UCA has truly helped us better understand ourselves and to unlock the diverse spectrum of our strengths so that we can confidently navigate the hurdles in our lives.

“..It actually makes us feel nostalgic to reminisce about all the memories throughout these years today. So, let's cherish these memories, good or bad, sweet or bitter. I remember the class of 2023 were given shirts with the print on stating Mountains of Opportunities. UCA indeed abounds in opportunities and with that comes the great teaching of acceptance, diversity, and pluralism as the core values of UCA.

“...I would like to take this special moment to express my gratitude to the Chancellor of the University, His Highness the Aga Khan and the Board of Trustees for their vision in establishing such a prestigious university in the remote mountainous regions of Central Asia. I am grateful to the senior management, administration, and all the staff

at UCA for their exceptional dedication and guidance throughout my journey.

“I would like to thank all the parents for their unreserved care and sacrifices without which this moment would have been impossible.

“Today, the degree we will receive serves as a symbol of self-cultivation, achievement from an institution whose values and vision will continue to influence us in the rest of our life. We should not forget that this is the fruit of an intellectually stimulating community from which we take away an attitude of caring for and responsibility towards our society. We should be symbol of the change that we would want to see in the world.

“Our journey does not end here, it rather takes on a lifelong pursuit of excellence, growth, and changemaking in our communities and the world. So, together, let us embrace the challenges that lie ahead and strive for success, not just for ourselves but for the advancement of the society as a whole.”

[Watch the full speech.](#)

UCA Donors and Volunteers Invited to Attend the 2023 Graduation

A delegation of donors and volunteers, who have made significant contributions to UCA over the years, were invited as special guests to the University's 2023 Graduation Event and the Awards Night.

At a special event in Naryn, the guests also had an opportunity to meet and interact with the UCA trustees, including Princess Zahra Aga Khan.

Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Chairman UCA Board of Trustees, hosted a welcome reception for the invited delegates. The reception was attended by UCA Trustees, AKU President and his wife, as well as senior AKDN leadership. The evening's highlight was a captivating performance by a Manaschi, a skilled reciter of the Kyrgyz epic Manas, one of the longest epic poems in the world.

During their time in Kyrgyzstan, the guests were given a guided tour of several of the AKDN projects, where they had the opportunity to interact with staff and beneficiaries. The guests were also able to experience the traditions, culture and scenic beauty of Kyrgyzstan.



UCA Honors Stellar Achievements of the Class of 2023



Graduates create memories of their achievements on Awards Night at the Khorog Campus.



Graduates proudly display their citation certificates at the Naryn Campus.

Preceding the 2023 graduation ceremony, the University of Central Asia (UCA)'s School of Arts and Sciences celebrated and recognised outstanding graduates at the annual Awards Nights Ceremony held simultaneously at its Khorog and Naryn campuses.

The students, their families, faculty, Board of Trustees and special guests joined in the festivities that marked the culmination of years of hard work and dedication. Cultural performances by UCA students and graduates added colour to the event.

The Awards Night commenced with speeches by the Associate Deans at the Khorog and Naryn campuses, who applauded the collective efforts and resilience of the graduating class. The Associate Deans urged the



graduates to serve as an inspiration to future generations.

“Windows invite openness, dialogue, amity; mirrors shrink the world, exclude the other. UCA has opened a large window for you.” said Dr. Ashrafi, Associate Dean, Naryn campus.

Graduates received citations for excelling in the fields of leadership, sports, and community service. Special awards were given to those who excelled in their research projects. The event also recognised faculty members whose mentorship and efforts helped students secure internship opportunities.

All the alumni diploma project abstracts can be accessed [here](#).

UCA Faculty Chronicles Kyrgyzstan's Richness



Lucy Palmer at the Orto Tokoy Reservoir in Kyrgyzstan.

Lucy Palmer, a faculty of Communications and Media at UCA's School of Arts and Sciences Naryn campus, is also an accomplished author and journalist. Her article titled “Wild Spirit: Lucy Palmer Lives Amid the Mountains, Nomads and Ancient Culture of Kyrgyzstan, Which Is Reclaiming Its National Identity,” was recently featured in the prominent [Condé Nast Traveler](#) magazine.

The insightful narrative chronicles Palmer's life in Kyrgyzstan and paints a vivid picture of her experiences at UCA's Naryn campus, including its remoteness and vibrancy. Palmer also offers readers a glimpse into the cultural richness, natural beauty, and warm hospitality of her country of residence along with its breathtaking landscapes, vibrant traditions, and diverse communities.

“In winter the university is encircled by impassive white mountains, alpine lakes and a landscape so pale that it's often hard to distinguish earth from sky.”

Lucy Palmer's article serves as a captivating invitation for readers from around the world to discover the hidden treasures of Kyrgyzstan, especially UCA's Naryn campus. By sharing her personal journey, Palmer ignites curiosity and fosters a deep appreciation for the country's beauty, resilience, and unique way of life.

Read Palmer's article [here](#).

UCA Bids Warm Farewell to Nasir Pirani



Nasir Pirani (right) receiving a gift from UCA.

The University of Central Asia recently paid tribute to Nasir Pirani who retired after seven years of distinguished service as the Founding Director of the University's Advancement and Public Affairs function.

Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Chairman, UCA Board of Trustees addressed the gathering comprised of staff from across locations. Dr. Kassim-Lakha commended Pirani for playing a key role in establishing UCA's brand profile in the region and for mobilis-

ing significant resources for the University.

Several staff also took the opportunity to highlight Pirani's contributions to UCA, especially his role in strengthening relations with local communities. Members recalled his important role in the design of the graduation regalia and the development of the University anthem.

Nasir Pirani was honoured with a special UCA commemorative plaque.

UCA Presented a Book on Education Authored by a Professor of Nazarbayev University

Professor Duishon Shamatov of Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan, presented to Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Chairman, UCA Board of Trustees, his recently published book in Kyrgyz language on education and happiness.

Dr. Kassim-Lakha warmly congratulated Professor Shamatov on the publication of his book, recognizing its significance and contribution to the field of education. He expressed gratitude to Professor Shamatov for gifting his books to UCA for use across UCA libraries.

In his book, Professor Shamatov explores a range of topics related to improving educa-

tion standards, drawing inspiration from the successful education models implemented in Finland and Singapore. Professor Shamatov also argues that by improving the status and image of teachers, the quality of education can be significantly enhanced. Access to quality education is an important element for human happiness.

Prior to his current role at Nazarbayev University, Professor Shamatov served as a Senior Research Fellow at UCA. His educational journey includes attaining a bachelor's degree from the Department of Foreign Languages at Osh State University, Kyrgyzstan. He received his Master of Education degree in Teacher Education from Aga Khan University's Institute for



Professor Shamatov (right) presents his book to Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha.

Educational Development. Professor Shamatov obtained his doctorate in education from University of Toronto, Canada.

Civil Society Initiative Presents its Research Findings on Gender

The School for the Advancement of Gender Equality (SAGE), a project of UCA's Civil Society Initiative and supported by the Government of Canada, recently released the findings of its nine research projects on gender-related challenges and trends in Central Asia. The audience comprised of academia, government officials, journalists, and well-known gender experts.

The research findings highlighted how stereotypes continue to hinder women's progress in the socio-economic and political spheres. Women often require the consent of their husband's family to engage in economic endeavors. The findings also demonstrate connections between gender, ecology, and health. Speakers also emphasized that progress on gender challenges require closer collaboration between the state, civil society, and the community.

Watch highlights of the event in [Bishkek](#) and [Dushanbe](#).



Participants engaging in group discussions in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

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