UCA Holds Regional Conference on Role of Civil Society in Development

The first of its kind in the past decade, the Civil Society Initiative (CSI) of the University of Central Asia (UCA) organised a regional conference on “New Pathways to Development” in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) on May 17th 2019. It provided a platform for key stakeholders – government, members of parliament, civil society organisations, corporations, and researchers – to discuss and debate new approaches to foster the growth of a vibrant civil society. Over 150 attendees from 12 countries participated in the Conference.

Altynai Omurbekova, Vice-Prime Minister of the Kyrgyz Republic, while delivering the opening address stated that the “Government is making strong efforts to engage civil society into the decision-making process, by creating an enabling environment through legislation and regulatory mechanisms, including the use of information technology.”

The Plenary session featured speakers giving an assessment of the overall state of civil society in the region. They included representatives from Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Information and Social Development, Tajikistan’s Parliamentary Committee on International Affairs, the World Bank Mission in Kyrgyzstan, the US Ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of UCA.

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Naryn Leadership Laud AKDN’s Contribution

A delegation from the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), led by Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Diplomatic Representative of AKDN Kyrgyzstan and Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the University of Central Asia (UCA), and including Prof. Dr. S. Sohail H. Naqvi, Rector of UCA, briefed Naryn town councilors and senior officials of the Municipality on current and potential AKDN programmes in the Naryn Oblast on May 29th. Participants also received updates on UCA and AKDN’s support for the Naryn Town’s Master Plan development.

The Naryn Governor, Mayor, and Town Council Chairman expressed their appreciation for AKDN’s significant support of the social and economic development of the Oblast (Province). The meeting provided an opportunity for the AKDN delegation to respond to questions, and discuss areas of further cooperation such as education, health care, and infrastructure development.
Regional Civil Society Conference

Bobur Bekmurodov from ‘Yuksalish’, a civil society initiative in Uzbekistan, noted that UCA’s regional forum offers a unique opportunity to learn from global experiences that can find practical application in the work of countries aiming to build a vibrant and effective civil society.

The Conference panel sessions discussed: the use of digital technologies in the social sphere; open data as a tool for civic dialogue; citizen-created city spaces; and open government participation. One panel featured a speaker from Uzbekistan on feminism in Central Asia, and another on the experience of ‘Muttakallim’, an Islamic women’s union in Kyrgyzstan, promoting women’s engagement in civic life, education, social advancement, and diversity. Promoting indigenous philanthropy was discussed by a number of speakers, including the Executive Director of WINGS, a Brazil-based international organisation promoting social investment, who observed that “It is thrilling to see the key role universities can play as honest brokers in leading and promoting philanthropic ecosystems in their countries.”

Universities in the region have been largely uninvolved in civil society development, noted UCA’s Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha. “However, universities have a critical role to play in this sphere – providing knowledge and skills, and cultivating responsible, active, and compassionate citizens who are engaged in the development process.”

The Civil Society Initiative of the University of Central Asia, as its Director Dinara Musabekova noted, “was launched in 2017 with the support of the Aga Khan Foundation USA (AKF USA), and its first effort involved extensive research and regional consultations on key issues to formulate a plan of action going forward. This Regional Conference, which was also funded by AKF USA, provided valuable input for CSI, as a university-based programme serving a broad spectrum of civil society actors.”

Higher Education Forum Visits Central Asia

Members of the Aga Khan Development Network’s (AKDN) Higher Education Forum (HEF) visited Tajikistan from May 12-16, and some members also travelled to Kyrgyzstan on May 17-18. This was the first official visit by the HEF to Central Asia, whose membership comprises senior officers of AKDN. The main objective of their visit was to better understand the regional landscape within which AKDN and UCA operate.

During their visit to Tajikistan, members toured UCA’s Khorog campus, met with students, faculty and staff, received presentations on undergraduate and co-curricular activities, and familiarised themselves with UCA’s research institutes. Visits to other AKDN programmes in Khorog included the Aga Khan Lycée, Khorog Medical Centre, Ismaili Centre and Jamat Khana, and Khorog Park. A meeting with the faculty and Rector at Khorog State University (KSU) was also arranged on May 14th, during which the HEF received presentations and discussed possible areas of collaboration.

HEF members include David Fraser, Convener of the AKDN Higher Education Forum; Paul Dhalla, Head of Research at AKDN; Firoz Rasul, President of the Aga Khan University (AKU); Farzana Karim-Haji, Director of the University Partnerships Office at AKU; Carl Amrhein, Provost of AKU; Azim Nanji, Special Advisor to the Provost at AKU; Leif Stenberg, Director of AKU’s Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations; Nimet Rener, Director, Aga Khan Education Services; Salim Bhatia, Director of Aga Khan Academies; Shama Vellani, Co-Director’s Office at the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS); Farhad Daftary, Co-Director and Head of Department of Academic Research and Publications at IIS; Michael Kocher, General Manager of the Aga Khan Foundation; Luis Monreal, General Manager of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC); Raj Isar, Education Director at AKTC; Dr. Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of UCA; Prof. Dr. S. Sohail Naqvi, Rector of UCA; Diana Pauna, Dean of UCA’s School of Arts and Sciences; and Dr. Bohdan Krawchenko, Dean of UCA’s Graduate School of Development.
How to Tackle Inertia of Kyrgyz Museums?

UCA’s Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit in collaboration with the Association of Anthropologists of Kyrgyzstan, the Museum Initiatives Centre, the Christensen Foundation, and the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), organised a workshop on “Cultural Policy of Kyrgyzstan: How to Overcome Inertia in Museums?” in Bishkek on May 7th. It brought together 40 representatives from the Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism of the Kyrgyz Republic, heads and specialists of museums, as well as experts of cultural heritage, to discuss cultural policy in Kyrgyzstan.

“Museums are part of the national culture that have an enormous role in the historical education of the young generation. When active and dynamic, they play a key role in the educational system of the country, and with proper development, they also stimulate tourism,” said Dr. Bohdan Krawchenko, Dean of the UCA’s Graduate School of Development, stressing on the importance of museums for education in his opening address.

During the workshop, participants discussed modern museum management and marketing, interactive participation of museums in public processes, and also developed proposals to give museums incentive to develop effective museum policies, create a programme for museum management, and to preserve cultural heritage and traditional knowledge for museums. It also explored museum strengths and weaknesses, best practices from other organisations, as well as the experience of Kazakhstan in terms of museum development, through keynotes addresses by Dr Galia Faizullina from Kazakh Turan University, Dr. Keneshbek Almakuchukov, Head of the Kyrgyz National Museum and Dr. Cholpon Turdalieva, Professor at AUCA. Summarising the workshop outputs, participants plan to continue joint activities for trainings and the establishment of the Kyrgyz Association of Museums.

SPCE Signs Agreement with Accelerate Prosperity

UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPCE) in Tajikistan and Accelerate Prosperity (AP) signed a Memorandum of Understanding on May 13th to provide financial and technical assistance services to targeted groups of entrepreneurs in all 16 districts of Tajikistan along the Afghan border.

This is part of the “Thrive Tajikistan: Partnership for Socio-Economic Development”, an alliance between the United States Agency for International Development and the Aga Khan Foundation.

The agreement includes conducting joint training programmes on basic business skills, providing funding opportunities through AP’s acceleration programme for entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs, as well as providing tailored support to SPCE graduates to help launch and support their businesses, including mentorship, training and networking opportunities.
Professionals Share Real Life Experience in Connecting to Your Discipline Programme

UCA launched a four-week “Connecting to Your Discipline” (CYD) programme for preparatory year students in Naryn (Kyrgyzstan) and Khorog (Tajikistan) on May 6th. Each week, participants discovered a new discipline through a series of workshops, guest lectures, career panels, interactive activities and field trips, which helped them better understand their majors and specialisations: Communications and Media, Computer Sciences, Earth and Environmental Sciences, and Economics.

Communications & Media

UCA students learnt about communications, storytelling, media production, advertising, marketing, bias in the media, world media systems, and reporting from industry professionals. Workshops were facilitated by international specialists including Kamil Karamali, a multi-platform storyteller and News Reporter from Global News in Canada, and Farhan Umedaly, an award-winning filmmaker from VoVo Productions. During their sessions, students learnt about the process behind what goes into putting together a newscast, how to be critical thinkers when ingesting different forms of news, and how to challenge the validity of information in the digital age. Participants put their learning into practice during excursions to Mynbulak (Kyrgyzstan) and Roshtqala district (Tajikistan) where students practiced their filmmaking and interview skills, which resulted in the production of several short films.

Computer Science

Preparatory programme students in Naryn and Khorog discovered the field of Computer Science from facilitators Farhez Rayani, Lighting Technical Director, formerly at Pixar Animation Studios, and Sarah Hakani, Artist, Educator and Technologist at Girls Who Code. They received an introduction to computer science, coding, and animation. As part of their sessions, students used block-based code to create interactive games, which allow them to play against their computer, as well as create immersive art, music, and narrative animations. They also learnt about 2D and 3D animations and created stop motion animations.
Economics

During Economics week, students in Naryn and Khorog developed creative business ideas that could bring both environmental and social benefits to the towns of Naryn and Khorog. Through this process, students learnt how to build a brand tagline, create a sustainable competitive advantage, the importance of market positioning when developing business ideas, and financial models. Students pitched their ideas to a "Drag-on's Den" style panel at the end of the week, and some business ideas included fruit bars, modern traditional clothes, and honey production businesses.

The facilitators in Naryn included Tracy Li, Business Analyst from Accelerate Prosperity Kyrgyzstan (an initiative of the Aga Khan Development Network), and Dr. Alisher Aldashev, Professor of Economics at Satbayev University in Kazakhstan. In Khorog, facilitators included Dr. Aldashev, as well as Dr. Alykhan Nanji, General Internal Medicine specialist from Calgary (Canada).

Earth & Environmental Sciences

In Khorog, students learnt about hydrology, geology, ecology and hazard management from facilitators Peter Marty, Lecturer at the Institute of Natural Resource Sciences of Zurich University of Applied Sciences, and Dr. David Rodgers, Visiting Faculty in Earth and Environmental Sciences and Fulbright Scholar at UCA.

Students looked at different case studies to assess issues such as the risk of flooding or earthquakes for a school building project, as well as theoretical knowledge in class. Students also gained experience in the field during excursions, such as to Barsem village, where they discussed the causes and challenges of the 2015 flood.

Students in Naryn learnt about hydrology, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), mapping, ecosystem resilience, ecology, conservation, climate change and environmental systems in the Naryn region. Lectures were led by Peter Marty, Dr. Roy Sidle, Director of UCA’s Mountain Societies Research Institute (MSRI) and Professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences; Evgenii Shibkov, GIS Research Associate at MSRI, Amadeus DeKastle, Lecturer in the Department of Environmental Management and Sustainable Development at AUCA, and Jarkyn Samanchina, Country Director at Fauna and Flora International.

Overheard

“The past month has been an incredible experience. We learned interview techniques, filmed our own movie, coded, created our own cartoons and a digital map,” said Romiz Abdullaev, UCA student from Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

“This week we are learning about the field of economics, and are developing our own business ideas that could contribute to the development of Naryn. "Connecting to Your Discipline" gave me a clear idea of what my major is all about”. Visit UCA's YouTube page to hear from participants.
**UCA Marathon Team Places Second in International Competition**

Eighteen UCA students and two faculty members competed in the 8th International “Run the Silk Road” Marathon of the Kyrgyz Republic in Cholpon-Ata, Issyk-Kul on May 11th. UCA’s Naryn campus marathon team won 2nd place during the Corporate Cup competition, which counts the combined running time of five of the fastest females, and five males running the 3km distance. UCA’s total time was 3:03:37 for its 10 fastest runners. Congratulations!

The event gathered nearly 2,000 people from 27 different countries including China, Pakistan, India, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia.

**Building Teacher Capacity in Khorog**

Tojiniso Olimnazarova (standing in photo), Lecturer in English for Academic Purposes at UCA, organised a series of workshops for English language teachers in Khorog from November 2018 to May 2019 as part of a community service initiative.

Olimnazarova provided professional development to teachers and teacher trainers from secondary schools and educational centres in Khorog including the Presidential School, Khorog Private Gymnasium, Khorog State University, Republican Institute for Professional Development in Education in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast, ‘Logos’ Educational Republic Center, Aga Khan Lycee, UCA’s SPCE, and the American Space Khorog.

As part of this initiative, she delivered six full-day workshops on Communicative Language Teaching and practical ways to implement it within English classrooms. Sessions were also conducted on the importance of critical thinking skills, and exploring strategies to incorporate them into teaching.

The project allowed Khorog English Teachers to share their knowledge and gain experience by presenting and co-presenting at the workshops. It also gave them an opportunity to gain professional experience at the local TESOL level (an accredited professional qualification for teaching English to speakers of other languages), encouraging them to pursue further training internationally. On May 5th, 43 English teachers were presented with certificates of participation and recognition by UCA.

**Investing in Youth to Shape the Future**

In Tajikistan, a landlocked country in Central Asia, over 55% of the population is under 25. While progress has been made to reduce poverty, unemployment remains prevalent and educational institutions struggle to keep up with a rapidly changing global environment. For many, the road to education and employment is a challenging one, especially for the nation’s youth population. Still, young Tajiks dream of building a better future for themselves, starting with a high-quality university education. For Hangoma, every UCA student is a future contributor to the mountain region. She sees herself as an aspiring change-maker, committed to one day helping solve local issues, like the town’s poor water management. Read the full story by the Aga Khan Foundation in English or Russian.
ICDL Testing Centers Open in Kochkor District Schools

UCA’s SPCE in Kyrgyzstan launched two new test centres on May 6th offering testing for the International Computer Driving License (ICDL), a digital skills and computer literacy certification. The centres are located at the Ninakan Zhundubaeva school (Kochkor village), and the Korchubek Aknazarov school (Cholpon village) in the Kochkor district, and were established as part of the “Demilgeluu Jashtar” project. Within this project, 11 schools in the Naryn region are currently implementing the ICDL programme, and over 4,000 students from these schools have already been trained with support of UCA as an official operator of ICDL in Central Asia.

Under the “Demilgeluu Jashtar” project, the ICDL programme will be implemented in 50 schools, including the launch of 10 ICDL test centres. It is aimed at increasing the economic employment and civic engagement of young people in Kyrgyzstan. The project is funded by the United States Agency for International Development, and is implemented by the University of Central Asia, the Mountain Development Support Programme for Kyrgyzstan, Association of Social Entrepreneurs, International Educational Debate Association in Central Asia, and Accelerate Prosperity, an agency of the Aga Khan Development Network. Watch a news report on Naryn TV to learn more: https://youtu.be/qQUJSeuGBTs?t=459.

New SPCE Courses Offered in Khorog

UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education delivered mobile repair (in photo) and cosmetology courses for the first time in Khorog to over 80 participants.

The mobile repair course provided an introduction to smartphone repair, and the cosmetology course covered theoretical and practical knowledge required for entry-level positions in the beauty industry. The courses were delivered in partnership with international experts.

Good to Know

UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education has enrolled over 135,000 learners since its inception in 2006, in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Afghanistan.

SPCE Entrepreneurship Programme Offered in Four Afghan Provinces

A women’s entrepreneurship programme was launched by UCA’s SPCE in the Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz and Bamyan provinces of Afghanistan in May. Over 580 women applied to the programme, and 60 successful applicants have received a scholarship for the three-month entrepreneurship programme. Students are learning topics such as the basics of marketing, business plan development, and information technology skills.

Photo shows marketing students in Bamyan visiting a handicrafts market led by women. They distributed questionnaires and conducted interviews with business owners to learn from their experiences, develop a short study about the Bamyan market, and discover how entrepreneurs create businesses based on the needs of the market. The programme is organised as part of the Afghanistan Community-Led Economic Stability Project (ACES) of SPCE in Afghanistan.
SPCE Boosts Teacher’s Training in Tajikistan

UCA’s SPCE conducted a two-week Training of Trainers (TOT) for 10 Instructors of its learning centres in Khorog and Bokhtar (Tajikistan) from April 29 to May 12. The training, which took place in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) covered entrepreneurship, and social entrepreneurship including topics on generating business ideas, marketing, business plan development, financial literacy, pitching, and Information Technology in business.

It was led by Liubov Shevchenko, Financial Analyst consultant with SPCE. It was organised as part of the Thrive Tajikistan project, funded by the United States Agency for International Development and the Aga Khan Foundation.

UCA Shares IT Technology Trends with Khorog State University

Shaukat Ali Khan, Chief Information Officer at UCA, visited Khorog State University to discuss potential for cooperation in technology, and met with Prof. Dr. Shermamad Jonnamadov, Rector of KSU, Mrs. Olga Sayfulloeva, Vice Rector of KSU, as well as other IT staff and Computer Science faculty. The UCA delegation introduced KSU representatives to best practices and emerging trends in the IT sphere.

KSU representatives expressed their appreciation and noted that UCA is an inspiration and a source of knowledge for many institutions in Tajikistan.

Campus Visits

Indian Ambassador

Mr. Somnath Ghosh, Ambassador of India to Tajikistan, visited the Khorog campus in May with a delegation from the Embassy of India. They toured the campus facilities, learnt about the University’s programmes and activities, and discussed potential areas of cooperation with Dr. Diana Pauna, Dean of UCA’s School of Arts and Sciences. Areas of potential collaboration include student exchanges, as well as guest speakers to the Khorog campus.

The Ambassador was impressed by the quality of educational opportunities provided to the students, and presented books to the campus library.

University Rectors from Kazakhstan Visit UCA

As part of an orientation visit, a delegation of Rectors and Senior staff from universities in southern Kazakhstan spent half a day at the University of Central Asia’s Naryn campus on May 6th.

UCA welcomed over 13,000 visitors to its campuses in Naryn and Khorog in 2018, including officials and high-level visitors from the Founding States, including government officials, AKDN agencies, international aid organisations, diplomatic corps, and universities.
A recent publication by UNICEF on Child-Responsive Urban Planning calls on all urban stakeholders to change their approach to urban planning by paying attention to Children’s Rights at a city level. Dr. Madina Junussova, Research Fellow at UCA’s Institute of Public Policy and Administration delivered public lectures in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and Tashkent, Uzbekistan, discussing “Child-friendly Urban Development.”

She discussed how child-friendly urban development can help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, from a global perspective to a local context.

The lecture also covered the newly defined Child Rights and Urban Planning principles, that put forward concepts and instruments that allow urban stakeholders to engage in evidence-based decision making for the development of sustainable cities where children live in healthy, safe, inclusive, and prosperous green communities.

Reconsidering the Meaning of Neighbourhood: Border Transformation between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan

Asel Murzakulova, Gulbara Omorova, and Evgenii Shibkov, UCA’s Mountain Societies Research Institute staff, published a brief on “The Transformation of Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Border Areas after 2016.” The brief examines large-scale transformations in transboundary areas during the period of border closures between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and provides insight and recommendations for local stakeholders. It is available for free download in English from UCA’s website.

Higher Education Policy in Central Asia and Afghanistan

Emma Sabzalieva

UCA’s Institute of Public Policy and Administration Working Paper #51 examines contemporary higher education in Central Asia, with a particular emphasis on Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. It offers policy propositions that may support these states to make their higher education systems more innovative by incorporating science and technology. Available for free download in English from UCA’s website.

Civil Society Initiative

UCA’s Civil Society Initiative has published four discussion papers as part of a series intended as for authors to share ideas with audiences concerned with current and emerging issues facing civil society development in Central Asia. They are available for free download on UCA’s website.

USAID Country Director Visits Khorog Campus

Representatives from the United States Agency for International Development mission in Tajikistan, led by Country Director, Paul Richardson, toured UCA’s Khorog campus on May 22nd.