Digital Transformation at Heart of Development Strategy for Kyrgyzstan

The President of the Kyrgyz Republic inaugurated the Digital Transformation in Central Asia (DTCA) conference on October 4 in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan). This three-day international event was jointly hosted by the University of Central Asia (UCA), State Committee for Information Technology and Communications, and the High Technology Park of the Kyrgyz Republic, and also included a day long session at UCA’s campus in Naryn.

The DTCA conference, taking place in the year designated by the Government of Kyrgyzstan as the Year of Regional Development and Digitalisation, brought together over 20 international speakers from 12 countries, and over 100 leading technology leaders from Central Asia, to discuss current and future technology trends in Central Asia. Technology professionals, government officials, educators, and researchers discussed the latest approaches to solving intriguing challenges in the fields of data collection and analysis, digitising government services, management of public and private enterprise, cyber security, and the increasing role of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in education and research.

In his inaugural address, President Sooronbai Jeenbekov announced that “We have set the goal to make Kyrgyzstan the top country in the region in terms of digitisation.” He added, “Digital technologies are changing the nature of the global economy by creating opportunities for every country to have wide-ranging involvement in the global process. In order to effectively use these opportunities, we need to create a new mindset that can implement these developments in public administration and business.”

UCA Students Promote Tech Projects with a Social Impact

UCA undergraduate students held a hackathon event at the Naryn campus (Kyrgyzstan) as part of the DTCA conference on October 6. The hackathon exhibition provided an opportunity for students to present nine innovative tech projects and prototypes with social impact. Conference participants evaluated the projects based on impact, feasibility, and creativity, among other criteria. The first place winner was “Virtual Eyes”, aimed at using a special pair of eye glasses with voice assist for people who are visually impaired.

Other projects included: services to provide support materials for people who are dyslexic; a database for online medical advice; an online platform to digitise and organise all aspects of an orphanage; a digital box for charity donations; segregating wet and dry waste to include more environment-friendly disposal methods; a digital platform connecting women and providing resources for people who have been subjected to abuse; a Bishkek to Naryn goods delivery system, and an online platform aimed at connecting employers and employees in Central Asia.

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Human capital and digital literacy were widely acknowledged to be a pre-requisite for any sustainable digital transformation, and to support this objective, business leaders and academics will be working together to scale educational programmes such as computing, social media, and e-commerce. Learning resources will also be made available through a web-based portal.

Alongside these initiatives, an emphasis was placed on improving cybersecurity with strong risk mitigation systems and new policies on the safe use of Internet as well as new privacy and transparency regulations, modelled on GDPR. Improved infrastructure will also be crucial to underpin the digital transformation strategy, and this will require investments in network coverage across the region as well as cloud services in the country. Taken together, these outcomes combine to create a digital transformation strategy that has the potential to generate significant value for the people of Kyrgyzstan.

Among the sponsors of the conference was the Russian Federation UNDP which collaborates with partners to promote policy responses and business decisions to end extreme poverty, curb inequalities, and fast-track progress for the people who have been left furthest behind.

The “Digital CASA - Kyrgyz Republic” project and Open Data were partners of the event, and Cisco-Greenlight IT Solutions and Consulting was the lead sponsor. Other sponsors included Logic Company, TallyMarks Consulting, Bai Tushum Bank, First MicroFinance Company, and the Soros Foundation.

In his concluding remarks, President Jeenbekov expressed his appreciation to the organisers of the Conference, including the University of Central Asia, the State Committee for Information Technology and Communications, and the High Technology Park of the Kyrgyz Republic. “I strongly believe that this Conference will become an important platform for new and creative ideas on digital transformation, and that its success will depend on the joint efforts of all stakeholders.”

Visit the DTCA conference website to learn more about the conference outcomes.
Online Public Lecture Series Launched

As one of the outcomes of the DTCA conference, UCA is hosting a series of online public lectures covering themes related to technology, digital transformation, and development. On October 25th, Dr. Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed, from the University of Toronto (Canada), delivered a lecture on “Understanding People and Designing Technology for Sustainable Development,” which is available on UCA's YouTube channel.

The next lecture will be held on November 19th at 4:00pm (GMT+6), on “Artificial Futures: Intelligent Robots in Science and Society,” delivered by Prof. Dr. Alan Winfield, from the University of the West of England, University of York, and the Cambridge Centre for the Future of Intelligence. Tune in to watch via video conferencing, or sign up to receive announcements directly to your inbox.

Technology and Higher Education in Central Asia

A panel discussion on the “Pros and Cons of Technology in Relation to Higher Education in the Context of Central Asia” was held at UCA's Naryn campus in September. It was organised and moderated by Dr Soheil Ashrafi, Assistant Professor of Communications and Media at UCA.

Panelists represented UCA staff and students and included Mehmomsho Sharifov, Visiting Faculty in Philosophy, Dr Masood Mir, Assistant Professor in Computer Science, Stanislav Zagorodnyev and Zohirbek Asanshoev, Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes, as well as UCA Computer Science students Abbosjon Madiev, and Arailym Yelemes. The podcast is available online, and was prepared by Mubashir Artas, UCA Communications and Media student.

UCA Hosts Meeting on Regional Development in Naryn

In support of 2019 as the Year of Regional Development and Digitisation in Kyrgyzstan, UCA hosted a meeting of Government’s Committee for the Development of Industry and Entrepreneurship. The event was organised with the support of the International Business Council (IBC) at UCA's Naryn campus on October 30th.

It was attended by representatives of the Government of Kyrgyzstan and Naryn Oblast, local entrepreneurs, and community leaders. The objective of the meeting was to present and discuss the goals for regional development, and the challenges being faced in its implementation. The participants also toured the UCA campus after the meeting.

Pilot Project Launches E-Learning Across Campuses

Hamid Khan, Senior Lecturer with UCA's School of Arts and Sciences, delivered an online lecture from Bishkek to freshmen students at the Khorog campus (Tajikistan), through a blend of video link and e-learning systems. As part of a pilot initiative, this will enable faculty on one campus to connect with students on another campus, overcoming geographical barriers.

“In line with its vision of being a world-class university, UCA aims to be a leader in the digital transformation of teaching and learning on its campuses. One new initiative is to connect, interlink and make knowledge and expertise accessible to UCA's campuses, and other locations through digital platforms and resources,” said Hamid Khan.
UCA and University of Alberta Partner to Develop Central Asian Faculty

UCA signed an agreement with the University of Alberta (UAlberta) in Canada, to establish a UCA-UAlberta Graduate Scholarship Programme. As part of UCA's Central Asian Faculty Development Programme (CAFDP), partners will jointly provide funding to support Central Asian students towards their doctoral programmes at UAlberta, which is ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide, and the top five in Canada.

The scholarships are designed to ensure that scholars from the region are strongly represented in UCA's faculty. Scholarship recipients are required to work for four years at UCA with pay, after the completion of their studies.

Experts Discuss Socio Economic Issues of Kyrgyzstan at Conference in Bishkek

The Fifth Annual Life in Kyrgyzstan (LiK) conference brought together over 100 participants from 10 countries, and served as an open and stimulating platform for intellectual exchange on social and economic changes in Kyrgyzstan, and Central Asia. The conference was aimed at promoting evidence-based policymaking, and gathered national and international experts from the government and public sector, development agencies, non-governmental organisations, academia and research institutions in Bishkek on October 23-24.

The conference speakers addressed a broad range of topics, including migration, agriculture, nutrition, health, youth employment, poverty, social protection, and social norms. The keynote speech was delivered by Louise Grogan, Professor of Economics at the University of Guelph (Canada) on the legacy of the Soviet Union on gender roles in Central Asia.

The conference was organised by UCA's Institute of Public Policy and Administration, Leibniz Institute of Vegetable and Ornamental Crops (IGZ), International Security and Development Center (ISDC), and the World Bank. It is supported by the Aga Khan Foundation Kyrgyzstan, UK’s Department for International Development, and the United States Agency for International Development.

"The socio-economic issues facing Central Asia are analytically complex, and evidence-based studies are required to inform policies and practice. UCA is deeply committed to playing a solid role in research, and is committed to ensuring that this stimulating forum continues to develop over the years to come," noted Dr. Bohdan Krawchenko, Dean of Graduate School of Development at UCA.

The conference also announced the release of the 5th wave of the LiK studies carried out in 2016, as well as the launch of the 6th wave of data collection in the Fall 2019. The LiK study is an open access, nationally representative multi-topic longitudinal survey of 3,000 households and 8,000 individuals in Kyrgyzstan. The survey tracks the same households and individuals in all seven Kyrgyz regions, and two cities of Bishkek and Osh, providing data over time on topics such as household demographics, expenditure, assets, migration, employment, agricultural markets, shocks, social networks and subjective well-being to name a few. The survey was first conducted in 2010 and then replicated in 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2016. The data is freely available for non-profit research, policy analysis, and teaching purposes.
UCA Students Maintain Highest Average ORT Scores in Kyrgyzstan

The Ministry of Education of the Kyrgyz Republic conducts mandatory National Testing (also known as ORT) each year for all secondary school graduates. For the third year in a row, the average ORT score of University of Central Asia (UCA) admits is the highest amongst many other universities in the country.

Scores for UCA students are as follows: 186.5 (2019), 189.8 (2018), and 186.1 (2017). The test is conducted by the National Center for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods of the Kyrgyz Republic.

The exams cover mathematics, reading, writing, grammar, and comprehension of Russian or Kyrgyz.

IT Teachers Boost their Skills in Naryn

Eleven teachers from the Jumgal district in Kyrgyzstan received Certificates of Achievement for successfully completing the International Computer Driving License (ICDL) programme, offered by UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPCE) in Naryn.

Over 150 guests, including 22 school directors attended the event in Chaek, Jumgal region, and expressed their interest to continue working with SPCE in the 2019-2020 academic year. Congratulations!

Teachers Day Recognises Decade-Long Commitment to Education

The Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic awarded Rahat Akylova (4th from right) and Ainura Alakaeva (3rd from left), English Instructors at UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPCE) in Naryn (Kyrgyzstan), with Certificates of Recognition in October.

Rahat and Ainura have demonstrated over 10 years of excellent work and commitment to UCA’s SPCE, and were acknowledged by Jarkyn Ibraeva, Vice-Governor of Naryn. Well done!

Good to Know!

Erik Krauss (left), Manager of Students Affairs at UCA’s Naryn campus, received a Certificate of Appreciation from the Governor of Naryn, Emil Alymkulov, to honour his contributions to education in the Naryn region. Congratulations!

Erik has been managing and supporting student life and outreach activities on campus and in the community since 2016, and has also been teaching English to the campus staff. This award is in recognition of his commitment to serving the community, promoting collaborative projects between UCA and Naryn town, as well as fostering community teaching and learning projects.

Last year, Hamid Khan, Senior Lecturer in English for Academic Purposes at UCA, was also presented this certificate of recognition by the Mayor of Naryn.
UCA Staff Wins First Place in Bishkek Half-Marathon

UCA’s Naryn campus running team in Kyrgyzstan successfully participated in the annual “Mol Bulak Kuz Demi” marathon on October 6th in Bishkek. Ten students and three faculty members represented UCA in all distances including 3km, 10km, 21km and 42km.

Luke Grenfell-Shaw (right in photo), from UCA’s School of Arts and Sciences won first place defeating 340 competitors in the half marathon distance (21km) with a time of 01:12:12.

Spotlight: Kalicha Ashyrbek kyzy

Kalicha Ashyrbek kyzy from Karacha village in the Bazar-Korgon district of Jalal-Abad, won a grant in March to expand her sewing workshop at home. Kalicha defended her business plan after completing an entrepreneurship programme implemented by UCA’s School of Professional and Continuing Education, and was selected to receive a grant as part of the “Demigeluu Jashtar” project, funded by the United States Agency for International Development in Kyrgyzstan.

She bought new equipment for sewing sportwear, and has employed five women from rural villages. “I started my business in 2017 with only two sewing machines and I worked alone,” said Kalicha. “After my training in entrepreneurship, I have created jobs for other women, and can take on larger orders.” Learn more about Kalicha’s story on a news segment by “Yntymak” Public Regional TV and Radio company: https://youtu.be/La97sSsUYAs

Students Explore the Rich Musical Traditions of Badakhshan

Freshmen students from UCA’s Khorog campus attended a lecture on “Musical Tradition and Innovation” on October 1st led by Dr. Sultonbek Aksakolov, Assistant Professor of History at UCA. The master class and musical show was conducted by a guest lecturer, Dr. Haideramad Tawakalov (in photo) from Khorog State University, and his musical group consisting of famous musicians and singers from Badakhshan, including Falaksaro Mullobo Nazarkhudoev.

Students learnt about the evolution of the rich and diverse musical tradition among the people of Pamirs, and watched performances of various genres of traditional and folk music. The lecture also covered the use and role of musical instruments, and concluded with lively discussions and performances from guest musicians, students, and faculty members.
UCA Brings Mental Health Awareness to Khorog

Marking Mental Health Day on October 10th, UCA’s Health Council, made up of students, faculty members, and counsellors, with the Community Social Safety Net, organised a “Mental Health Day” event at the Khorog campus. Over 75 guests from the Khorog community participated in various workshops on stress management, suicide prevention, self-esteem and communication skills, as well as yoga and mindfulness sessions. Participants commented that the workshops increased their awareness of advocacy against social stigmas, as well as mental health issues.

This year’s theme for World Mental Health Day was suicide prevention. Using kites as symbols of hope and resilience, participants wrote motivational words on kites for those dealing with depression or other mental health issues.

Students Host Model UN Conference in Khorog

UCA’s Model United Nations (MUN) conference brought together 120 participants from four regions of Tajikistan, as well as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Organised by UCA students at the Khorog campus from October 21-23, it aimed at educating young people in the arts of debate, negotiation, and public speaking by providing a forum in which they can hone their skills. Participants discussed the fascinating realities and complexities of international relations through a series of simulations of international organisations. The first MUN conference was held in 2018 at the Naryn campus.

The conference featured two guest lectures by Alif Khalfan, Vice President of Product Strategy at Disney on cybersecurity, and Fatima Kassam (pictured, bottom left), Leaders International Forum Global Coordinator for Poverty Alleviation, who shared her previous experiences working with the UN’s World Food Programme in African countries.

“We organised this conference to start conversations about current issues facing our society and the world,” said Saif Ur Rahman, UCA student, and conference organiser. “Six committees covered a variety of economic social and cultural issues, and collectively, the conference participants came up with a set of possible solutions to problems that exist in our daily life,” continued Parvina Sultanmamadova, UCA student and organiser. Learn more in a media report in Tajik by Badakhshan TV.
Spotlight: UCA Students Study at Cambridge Summer Programmes

Four UCA undergraduate students from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan had an opportunity to attend the University of Cambridge’s International Summer Programme in the United Kingdom. With funding from UCA, students enrolled in two-week undergraduate level Interdisciplinary, Business and Entrepreneurship summer programmes, and shared their experiences in a series of reflections.

“As a future economist and entrepreneur, studying at Cambridge gave me an incredible chance to learn essential knowledge about launching your own startup,” said Anisa Abibulloeva (above), who is studying Economics at UCA’s Khorog campus. Read her story.

“My experience at the Summer Programme at Cambridge influenced me in many ways, and I am now strongly considering building a career path in data science,” said Karlygash Kussainova (above) from Kazakhstan. “The courses made me think about my behavior, career path, and I learnt about the importance of technological progress in international development, alongside a diverse team of people.” Read her story.

“It was one of my most productive experiences. The Summer Programme at the University of Cambridge brought me valuable life experience, new friends, new feelings, and an education at one of the best universities in the world,” said Burulsun Taalaibekova (above).

Burulsun is a sophomore student from Naryn, and studies Computer Science at UCA’s Naryn campus. Read her story.

“This programme made me more confident in myself. The knowledge I gained is extremely useful in my current projects, and will help me in my future endeavors. I would have never thought that I, from a remote mountainous village in Kyrgyzstan, would ever get an opportunity to participate in such a one-of-a-kind event at the University of Cambridge. It has changed my perspectives on life,” said Nurlan Nogoibaev (above) reflecting on the experience. Read his story.

“Building New Cultural Partnerships along the Silk Road

Mike Grang, Professor of Cultural Geography at Durham University discussed project objectives.

New transport connectivity driven by China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers new hopes and opportunities to communities in the mountainous regions of Central Asia. However, increased connectivity also carries the potential to introduce significant new societal challenges with regard to benefits and their possibly unequal distribution, as well as challenges for socio-cultural resilience.

UCA’s Graduate School of Development hosted the meetings on October 18-20 in Bishkek about the launch of the Resilient Silk Route Cultural Heritage Network. Funded by UK’s Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), the project is aimed at building a network, linking local organisations and academic institutions in Pakistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to help develop more resilient local economies and more sustainable societies in their mountain regions in the context of BRI.

The GCRF network will address issues of preserving the local cultural heritages of mountain communities, work through the threats and opportunities created by the transit corridor development, and develop a stronger South-South collaboration and knowledge sharing platform.

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Civil Society Initiative Promotes Good Governance and Civic Engagement

As a follow-up to UCA's Civil Society Conference in May 2019, the Civil Society Initiative (CSI) of UCA and the National Forum of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) conducted training workshops for civil society organisations (CSOs) on alternative monitoring of anti-corruption activities of state entities in September.

UCA's CSI has also been engaged in several events this year including participating in an Innovation Festival in Almaty, which brought together CSOs from the region to exchange ideas on civil society development in Central Asia. Dinara Musabekova, CSI Director at UCA, also delivered a presentation on state accountability and reclamation of civic space at the Asia Europe People's Forum in Kuala Lumpur.

CSI aims at facilitating learning networks around key themes of good governance, civic engagement, and philanthropy through its work.

Abai and the Future of Kazakhstan

UCA's Aga Khan Humanities Project hosted a public lecture on "Abai and the Future of Kazakhstan" on October 16th in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Abai Qunanbaiuly was a Kazakh poet, composer, and philosopher, who contributed to the philosophical thinking of Kazakh people.

The lecture was delivered by Orazaly Sabden, Head of the Department for Globalisation and Economic Policy, Institute of Economics, Ministry of Education and Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Through Abai’s teachings, Sabden explained how to build a humane society in the 21st century. He covered several topics such as the direction the world is taking, building harmony between humans and nature, using technology in economics, the future of youth and small enterprises, and the efficiencies of public administration. Watch the lecture in Russian at: https://youtu.be/OwPZOGdikuM

Publications

New Research and Facts about Centuries-Old Naryn

UCA's Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit has published a new research paper in Russian on ancient archaeological sites that were discovered during the construction of UCA's campus in Naryn (Kyrgyzstan). Available for free download on UCA's website.

The publication highlights how archaeological excavations were conducted on UCA’s Naryn campus since 2012, which revealed layers of settlements from the Mesolithic, Eneolithic, Bronze, and later periods. Discovery of these ancient sites has led to a scientific study of the technological and cultural evolution of the communities that used to live in the region.

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Silk Road

“UCA has a fair amount of empirical data, that fits well into this new project and can enrich it,” noted Dr. Bohdan Krawchenko, Dean of the Graduate School of Development, in his opening address. He noted some examples including: a research project with the Lahore University of Management Sciences on trade links between Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan; BRI assessment work, completed by UCA's Institute of Public Policy and Administration; a Research Paper on Chinese investments; and the Gobi Framework project implemented by IPPA jointly with the University of Oxford and the Research Institute of Mongolia, which investigates how Chinese infrastructure investments transform societies, economies, and landscapes in Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

The meetings were organised by UCA’s Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit and was attended by Research Fellows from Durham University (UK), Oxford University (UK), and representatives of ‘Laarjverd’ NGO (Pakistan).

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