

The University of Central Asia

Authors: Dhanani, Nasreen, and Nowrojee, Sia

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The University of Central Asia

Generating, Harnessing, and Applying Knowledge About Mountain Societies



UNIVERSITY
OF CENTRAL ASIA

The University of Central Asia (UCA) was founded in 2000 by the governments of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan, and by His Highness the Aga Khan, with the aim of offering an internationally recognized standard of higher education in Central Asia and of producing knowledgeable, skilled, and creative graduates who will contribute leadership, ideas, and innovations to the transitioning economies and communities of the region. Campuses are located in the mountain communities of Khorog (Tajikistan), Naryn (Kyrgyz Republic), and Tekeli (Kazakhstan). UCA's mission is to promote the socioeconomic development of Central Asia's mountain societies, while at the same time helping the diverse peoples of the region to preserve and draw upon their rich cultural traditions and heritages as assets for the future.

Developing academics and communities

As a development-focused university, UCA promotes sustainable development through education. It aims to become a hub for stakeholders engaged in the ambitious agenda of mountain development in the region. Academic programs and curricula will be informed and strengthened by field-based research of use to mountain communities. Students and faculty will have unique opportunities to engage in interdisciplinary, action-oriented research with communities and development organizations, to sustain development in the region. Emphasis will be on the ability of students to synthesize insights from various disciplines and become civic-minded innovators and leaders who are effective agents of development.

UCA is currently developing its campuses, academic and research programs and institutes, and has several programs underway. To build future faculty, UCA's Central Asian

Faculty Development Program places Central Asians in partner universities in the UK, Asia, and North America. These students are expected to return to Central Asia upon completion of their doctoral studies. Currently, 20 scholars have been placed. To foster interdisciplinary scientific research on issues that affect mountain communities within relevant academic areas, UCA will launch its first research center, tentatively named the Mountain Societies Research Center (MSRC). The MSRC will support the academic agenda by producing relevant and applied research and promoting collaborative research with regional and international partners. One initiative of the MSRC is to promote a regional monitoring system, the Central Asian Mountain Monitoring Network, to capture biophysical, social, economic, and cultural data from existing and emerging sources to inform programs and policies in the region.

Building a university and skills in mountain communities

UCA's degree programs will be offered through the undergraduate School of Arts and Sciences and the graduate School of Development. To date, the School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPCE), operational since 2006, has provided courses to 15,000 adults and drop-outs from school, mostly high school, in the 3 campus communities and in urban centers. SPCE programs improve employment and income-generating opportunities through skills and vocational training in areas such as English, information technologies (IT), accounting, tourism, entrepreneurship, and construction trades. UCA's Aga Khan Humanities Project promotes the use of its integrated humanities curriculum in 31 universities and high schools in the 3 founding countries

through free training and distribution of textbooks. Students and faculty are exposed to modern pedagogy, develop academic skills, and engender respect for cultural pluralism and traditions to prepare the next generation of Central Asian leaders.

Biodiversity on campus and in communities

UCA's 3 campuses are being built with state-of-the-art classrooms, laboratories, and libraries; residential and dining facilities for 4,000 students and faculty; and staff, with an integrated role for IT (Figure 1). Landscaping around the campuses and eventual park areas will provide living laboratories for scholars and host communities to study and enjoy the biodiversity of indigenous vegetation on the respective campuses, each with its own unique ecology. Among its activities, the Research Program is engaged in the development of herders' manuals for sustainable pasture management in the Kyrgyz and Tajik Pamirs; use of fodder trees to reduce the social costs of ecological rehabilitation, and the use and introduction and/or re-introduction of indigenous crops to enhance food security; and through SPCE, strengthening the capacity of nongovernmental organizations and state conservation organizations in modern, collaborative conservation, and applied research.

Scholarship to sustain development

UCA is working with the Aga Khan Development Network and other development organizations to assess research needs and strengthen evidence-based approaches to improve the efficacy of development practices and promote sustainable development in mountain areas. UCA's Research Fellows Program provides support and

FIGURE 1 UCA Khorog Campus: the architects' main front view of the campus in Khorog, Tajikistan. (Photo courtesy of the University of Central Asia)



unprecedented access to the region to international fellows and unique opportunities for joint research and mentoring for young Central Asian fellows. Through this program, a critical mass of research activities will be supported before the university's degree programs become operational. Current topics include labor migration, Central Asian cultural traditions, education policy, and geoprocessing data on natural resource monitoring and land management. UCA fellows publish widely and participate actively in international conferences within their disciplines.

Cultural heritage and resilience

UCA's programs honor and integrate the extraordinary and diverse cultural assets that have long been protected by mountain communities, and play a large part in their continued resilience. UCA supports research on Central Asian musical and oral traditions, religion, and philosophy, and on the role of cultural traditions in the formation of national identity. UCA is publishing scholarly publications on the Kyrgyz musical instrument, the *komuz*; the Musical Arts of the Pamirs; and country-specific bibliographies on Central Asian music. SPCE tourism courses on yurt camping and mountain guides combine traditional knowledge with contemporary economic opportunity.

UCA's presentation of nomadic herders' perspectives on climate change at the *COP15 UN Climate Change Conference* provided unique indigenous insight into a global problem.

Partnerships for communities

UCA has strategic partnerships with other universities to develop research, training, and successful interventions in mountain communities. By linking into a strong network, UCA hopes to strengthen regional efforts to address mountain development. UCA serves as the regional host for key networks, including the Mountain Forum and the Mountain Partnership through the Mountain Partnership Consortium, and the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South. It is a member of the Himalayan University Consortium and the Eurasia Pacific Uninet. In October 2009, UCA cosponsored a *Forum on Labor Migration in Central Asia*, organized by the Central Asian Mountain Partnership and other partners. UCA benefits from close collaboration with research staff and technical assistance from the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, and will host the 2011 meeting of CDE's World Overview of Conservation Technologies and Approaches initiative (WOCAT).

Harnessing and making knowledge accessible

UCA's growing partnerships with universities, networks, governments, and development organizations are creating the foundation for a strong information-sharing network. UCA aims to be a repository of knowledge and a leading reference center for unique materials for scholars and stakeholders concerned with Central Asia. UCA is putting in place, and training Central Asian teams to manage, an effective knowledge management system to facilitate access to existing and emerging research findings, share accessible scholarly knowledge, and facilitate effective development practices. UCA's electronic library is considerable and includes documents and multimedia resources from key regional sources, including the Pamir Archive and the Kyrgyz-Swiss Forestry Support Programme archives.

AUTHORS

Nasreen Dhanani* and Sia Nowrojee

* Corresponding author:
nasreen.dhanani@ucentralasia.org

UCA Research Programme, Central Administration Office, Str. Toktogul 138-138 A, Bishkek 720001, Kyrgyz Republic.
<http://www.ucentralasia.org/>

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