

Welcome Address by President Firoz Rasul
Convocation of the Aga Khan University
Kampala, Uganda, 8 February 2020

Our Chief Guest, Dr Francis Omaswa, Executive Director of the African Center for Global Health and Social Transformation,
Aga Khan University Trustee Mr. Yusuf Keshavjee, Ministers of Government,
Leaders, faculty, and staff of the University, Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Parents, alumni, partners, and supporters, Distinguished guests,
And, most importantly, graduands,



Hamjambo and karibuni. Welcome to the 17th Convocation of the Aga Khan University in Uganda.

Thank you all for joining us for this most important and the most joyous day in the University's calendar. Convocation is the culmination of all our efforts. Today, we celebrate the success of our 142 graduands and look forward to the impact that they will have on the lives of fellow Ugandans.

Graduands, yours has been a remarkable journey.

You have faced innumerable challenges, and you have overcome them all – from implementing new pedagogies in the classroom, to completing action research projects in your clinics and hospitals, to making your first contributions to humanity's storehouse of knowledge.

You forged relationships with classmates, colleagues, and faculty from across Uganda and beyond, learning first-hand how poorly stereotypes prepare us for the infinite complexity of our fellow humans.

You discovered both how much there is to learn and how many profound questions remain unanswered, or even unasked.

Throughout your time at the Aga Khan University, we asked you to meet the highest standards. It wasn't easy, was it? But you did it.

You have *earned* your degrees and diplomas. You did so thanks to your love of learning, your hunger to develop your capacities, and your desire to help solve the problems facing your communities and your country.

You make us all very proud. You and your family members should be proud of what you have

achieved. You have the knowledge and skills to change people's lives for the better.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in congratulating the Class of 2019.

We have many people to thank for making today possible. Our faculty and staff, who are tireless in their dedication to our mission. Our alumni, whose achievements have burnished the name of the Aga Khan University across Uganda and East Africa and all over the world.

And, of course, our donors. Every year, thousands of friends, alumni, and current and former faculty and staff donate to the Aga Khan University. Their generosity makes it possible for us to provide advanced facilities for learning, to offer scholarships, to conduct ground-breaking research, and much more – all of this, even in difficult economic times.

We also have many institutional supporters to thank. I would like to express our gratitude to the Johnson & Johnson Foundation; Global Affairs Canada; the French Development Agency, AFD; the German government's BMZ and the German Development Bank, KfW; the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation; ELMA Philanthropies; and numerous other organisations that support our work.

Yet our greatest debt of gratitude is to our founder and Chancellor, His Highness the Aga Khan, whose ongoing financial support, vision, and inspiration continue to drive our University to greater heights.

For example, last year, the Aga Khan University was named one of the top 100 universities in the world in clinical medicine by the Shanghai Ranking of World Universities.

It is an amazing honour. Especially because no other university in East Africa or Asia made the top 100.

Our ranking reflects the research prowess of our faculty. But it is also our Chancellor who laid the groundwork by committing AKU to the pursuit of world-class standards and excellence.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is an extraordinary time in the history of the world. It is exciting, disorienting, and sometimes disturbing.

But when the complexity of events breeds incomprehension and apprehension, the speed of change sows confusion, and partisans propagate disinformation – that is when universities prove just how indispensable they are. The combination of dispassionate clarity and bold innovation that the best universities offer has never been more valuable.

This is the Aga Khan University's time to shine. And we are rising to the challenges and opportunities of this era.

One of the most important developments of our time is the emergence of new fields such as artificial intelligence, data science, genomics, stem cell science and regenerative medicine. They

have enormous potential to extend and improve our lives and advance our understanding of the world we inhabit. I am proud to report that AKU is working to fulfil the promise of these new fields.

With the support of the University of California, San Francisco, our Centre for Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research has begun to contribute to the global search for new treatments for chronic diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, neurological diseases and diabetes. Our researchers are also utilising data science and artificial intelligence to generate new insights into malnutrition, cardiac surgery outcomes for children, and the increase in the incidence of heart disease in women – as well as to piece together and analyse the original versions of historic Arabic texts.

But advances like these also create a tremendous challenge. Namely, the challenge of making sure they benefit the whole world, not just a fortunate few.

In the words of our Chancellor: “The populations of Asia and Africa cannot be isolated from the best simply because they have been born in countries outside the Western world.”

Therefore, the Aga Khan University is helping to build Africa’s and Asia’s capacity to deliver high-quality health care and education.

Our newest initiatives include: a Centre for Global Surgical Care to make life-saving surgery more accessible for low-income populations; a Centre for Cancer Research to develop treatments specifically for East Africa’s population; and a Centre of Excellence in Trauma and Emergency Response and Preparedness to strengthen the ability of public and private institutions to respond to disasters and emergencies.

Our Institute for Educational Development has equipped more than 2,000 Ugandan educators with new strategies for enhancing teaching and learning, benefitting hundreds of thousands of students. The Institute is also working to ensure Ugandan students acquire in-demand skills in collaboration with Ugandan teacher training institutions and the Belgian technical corporation organisation.

The Aga Khan University’s programme to encourage teaching excellence within the University was recently accredited by Advance HE in the United Kingdom. We are the first university in Africa to earn such an accreditation.

Most significantly of all for Uganda, we are working to build a new Aga Khan University Hospital in Kampala.

The Hospital is AKU’s largest capital project in East Africa. It will be a transformative force in Ugandan health care. It will deliver international-quality care in fields ranging from obstetrics to oncology. Its Patient Welfare Programme will enable access for low-income individuals. As a teaching hospital, it will educate outstanding health professionals. And it will support research that helps solve Uganda’s health challenges.

We will also construct an academic building and student housing, thanks to the generous support of BMZ, the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and KfW, the German development bank, as well as numerous private donors from around the world. This will allow us to educate not only doctors, nurses, and midwives, but journalists, communicators, and teachers.

We are grateful for the strong support the Hospital has received from His Excellency President Yoweri Museveni, the Right Honorable Prime Minister Dr Ruhakana Rugunda, and other Ministers of Government – all of whom view this project as a national strategic priority.

I have spoken of the advance of knowledge producing challenges, in addition to extraordinary benefits. In a similar fashion, the progress of global integration enriches our lives in countless ways, while also exposing societies to destabilising forces.

This is an age when all our fates are intertwined – when the ripple effects of an event on the other side of the globe have the power to reshape our lives. Just look at the impact of the new coronavirus.

In the global era, it is imperative that institutions collaborate across boundaries of all kinds to share and grow knowledge, and to increase cross-cultural understanding.

That is precisely what the Aga Khan University is doing. The number, depth, and diversity of our partnerships are greater than ever. Last year alone, we signed or renewed partnership agreements with the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary in Canada, the NOVA University of Lisbon in Portugal, and the University of Washington and Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in the United States.

Fred Hutch is well-known for its partnership with the Uganda Cancer Institute, and we will be working closely with them with an aim to improve cancer care in Uganda and across East Africa.

Our Graduate School of Media and Communications is partnering with Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government to offer a joint course in adaptive leadership. The AKU Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations in London now offers a dual degree with Columbia University in New York. Both programmes are open to East Africans and we encourage them to apply.

These are some of the many ways that the Aga Khan University is evolving to meet the demands of a changing world, and to deliver on its mission of improving quality of life in Africa and Asia.

Ultimately, however, our most important contribution to the societies we serve is our graduates.

As of today, the number of Ugandans who have graduated from the Aga Khan University stands at more than 1,000. From Arua to Mbarara to Kampala, they are leading change – as educators, clinicians, entrepreneurs, advocates, public servants, and policymakers.

It is an amazing group of men and women. So amazing, in fact, that we felt they deserved a mascot. And graduands, as I think you know, you now have one which is the AKU leopard.

The students chose the leopard as our symbol because we feel it represents three traits that are common to all our students and alumni – indeed to the entire AKU community. These traits will serve you well in the years ahead.

The first trait is courage. The courage to embrace the new and attempt what you have never done before. The courage to stand up against unethical practices in the face of pressure to fall in line.

The second trait is perseverance. Inevitably, there will be times when, despite your best efforts, you will fall short. There is no shame in that: to never risk failure represents a failure of courage.

What matters is what you do next. Remember that those who survive disappointment with their determination intact, and learn the hard lessons it has to teach, are forces to be reckoned with.

The third trait is agility. Today, change happens in the blink of an eye. Technology is reshaping everything from work to relationships to attention spans. The world's centre of gravity is shifting from the West to the East and from the North to the South. In Uganda, as in many other countries, young people are the majority of the population – and I do not need to tell you, they are eager to move ahead and are ambitious.

To maintain your balance in such world, you need the agility of a leopard.

Stay agile, remain courageous, and continue to persevere – and you will surely achieve all that you are capable of.

In a few moments, you will officially become part of the Aga Khan University alumni. You and your fellow graduates share formative experiences and foundational values. Connect with one another. Collaborate with one another. Together, you are a powerful force for change.

Remember: you are all leopards.

Graduands, the world needs you. It needs the knowledge you have acquired, and the confidence you have developed, and the discoveries you have made about yourselves, your fellow humans, and our world.

Thank you and asanteni sana.

Read online: <https://www.akdn.org/speech/mr-firoz-rasul/welcome-address-president-firoz-rasul>