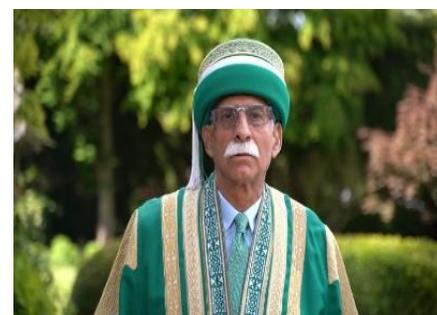


**Speech by President Firoz Rasul
at the Global Virtual Convocation of the Aga Khan University
Karachi, Pakistan, 22 May 2021**

His Highness the Aga Khan, Chancellor of the University
Our Chief Guest Melinda French Gates
Chairman Haile Debas and members of the Board of Trustees;
Provost and Vice President, Academic Carl Amrhein
Faculty, staff, alumni, donors, partners, friends, and family members
And most importantly, our graduands:



Assalam-u-alaikum, hamjambo, good morning, good afternoon, and good evening.

Today is a historic day for the Aga Khan University. Thanks to the power of technology, we are conducting our first-ever global convocation ceremony simultaneously across 13 time zones. We are bringing together our graduands, their family members, and AKU's faculty and staff in six countries, our trustees in nine countries, and our friends and well-wishers in countless locations across the world. Only a uniquely international institution like AKU could connect so many people across so many borders and boundaries. I am very grateful to the teams in several countries who made this possible.

An occasion like this deserves a chief guest with a truly global vision, influence, and reputation – and no one fits that description better than Melinda French Gates. We are extremely grateful for her participation, which I know will be an inspiration to our graduands.

This ceremony marks the end of the Class of 2020's journey at AKU, and the beginning of its next adventure. And it punctuates a year unlike any other in the lives of the graduands or the University's existence – a year of formidable challenges and momentous achievements.

The path the graduands walked was winding, steep, and strewn with obstacles. But they navigated it with the courage, agility, and perseverance that are the hallmarks of true AKU Leopards.

Graduands, you passed the test of 2020 with flying colors. Nothing can stop you now.

This is a unique moment in the world's history. It is an extraordinary time to be graduating. The pandemic has robbed millions of their lives and even more of their livelihoods. But it has also inspired unforgettable acts of sacrifice, solidarity, innovation, and ingenuity. And it has opened our eyes to the selfishness and inequity that continue to disfigure our world.

In exposing harsh realities to public view, the coronavirus has planted the seed of transformation in our midst. More and more people are asking themselves a simple, but profound question: What can I do to help? How can I make a difference?

Certainly, that question has been resonating in our thoughts here at AKU. Before I proceed, I would like you to hear how some of our faculty and staff are answering it.

Malnutrition, lack of education, gender inequality, chronic illness – these are daunting problems. As part of the Aga Khan Development Network, AKU is tackling all of them and many other issues with the fearlessness and creativity that have defined the University for the past 38 years.

And today, the 667 members of the Class of 2020 are joining the fight.

They are part of a new generation. The men and women of this generation are the most educated in history, with many being the first in their family to attend university. They possess the confidence that comes with their immense numbers, for in much of Asia and Africa, the young constitute a majority of the population. Born into the digital era, they are at home online and eager to make full use of technology's potential.

Crucially, they know the remarkable feats and unity of purpose that a great undertaking can inspire. For in 2020 and 2021, they have risen to every occasion. And so has AKU.

Day after day, our health professionals have masked up, donned their protective gear, and bravely served on the front lines. Even as I speak, they are doing so. All of us have worked by the light of their example, seeing in them models of compassion and dedication.

AKU's researchers have helped to deliver new tools in the battle against the pandemic. Our genetic sequencing capabilities have put us at the forefront of testing and tracking new viral mutations. We contributed to multiple international clinical trials of drugs and vaccines, in partnership with leading universities and pharmaceutical companies. We met challenges with innovation, 3D-printing nasal swabs and building our own UV-light device to sterilize hospital spaces.

When lockdowns were imposed, our faculty and staff worked around the clock to ensure our students could continue learning online, including by providing connectivity and laptops where needed. And where circumstances allowed, we brought our students safely back to campus.

When governments requested our help in training public-sector doctors and nurses in caring for COVID patients, we leapt at the opportunity. Our online courses have reached more than 22,000 individuals. And our hotline enables doctors at other hospitals to get AKU's advice on caring for severely ill COVID patients.

We are profoundly grateful to all those who made such achievements possible. In a time of endless strains and stresses, our faculty and staff continued to meet the highest standards. At every turn, our alumni, former staff, volunteers, and students asked: “How can we help?”

The support of our partners has been indispensable, including that of development agencies such as Global Affairs Canada, the German government’s BMZ and KfW, and AfD, the French Development Agency; organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Dawood Foundation, the Johnson & Johnson Foundation, and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation; and universities such as Harvard, the University of Virginia, the University of California San Francisco, Columbia University, and Brown University.

Despite a worldwide recession, our donors have been selfless in their generosity. Their gifts have enabled AKU to provide its most disadvantaged patients with life-saving care, to offer scholarships to students, build new facilities, purchase vital equipment and PPE, and launch new academic and research programmes.

Of course, our foremost gratitude is to our founder, Chancellor, and chief benefactor, His Highness the Aga Khan. His wisdom continues to guide us, and his vision continues to inspire us, as they have since the University’s inception.

This is my last convocation as President of the Aga Khan University. Over the past 15 years, I have watched our remarkable graduates go on to make impactful contributions to education, science, healthcare, culture, society and governments around the world. I look back with great pride and satisfaction on what the University has achieved through the efforts of the outstanding people who are part of AKU. This team is my greatest legacy. I would like to welcome Sulaiman Shahbuddin as the incoming President who will inherit this great team.

I am extremely grateful to His Highness the Aga Khan for giving me and Saida the opportunity to serve AKU under his guidance and direction. I am grateful to the Chairman and Trustees for their sage counsel and advice. I am grateful to my colleagues at AKU for all the joint learning, discovery and knowledge; and for the compassion, commitment and courage, and for all the wonderful friendships.

Graduands, there are special generations in history. Those that won independence for Asia and Africa. That gave us the world’s first democracies. That laid the foundations of modern science. They are the ones to whom a great task is entrusted, and who respond with unquenchable enthusiasm.

I believe your generation can be one of these, and that as members of the Aga Khan University Class of 2020, you can lead the way. You can be at the forefront in building the independent intellectual and scientific capacity that will enable Asia and Africa to tackle the biggest challenges facing them and the wider world.

The education you have received has prepared you to compete and collaborate with the world’s best. Throughout your time at AKU, you have awed us with your hunger for knowledge, your pioneering spirit, and your agility in the face of change.

Only one question remains for each of you to answer: What difference will I make?

I know I speak for everyone watching this ceremony around the world when I say that we cannot wait to learn your answers.

Thank you.

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