

**Valedictorian Speech by Ms. Anam Ehsan
at the Global Virtual Convocation of the Aga Khan University
Karachi, Pakistan, 22 May 2021**



The Chancellor,
Honorable Chief Guest,
Ladies and gentlemen,
And my fellow graduates,

The Aga Khan Class of 2020 – or as a friend once jokingly called us ‘The Aga Khan Class of COVID’. This may be an unconventional ceremony, we may be sitting here with masks and have loved one’s hundreds of miles away, but let me tell you all, even a global pandemic could not stop us from graduating. Congratulations AKU Class of 2020! You did it. We all did it. Before reflecting on all that we are celebrating today I want you to picture a few, very true stories.

Ayesha is 4 years old, she lives in a village in Pakistan, she doesn’t learn and laugh at school, instead she is on her knees sweeping floors to earn for the family. She is just one of the 22.5 million uneducated children in Pakistan. Simoni is a few days old orphan in Tanzania. Her mother died in labor, bleeding on a bus. Tanzania has amongst the highest maternal mortality in the world. Njuguna (jookuna) is a resident nurse in Murang, Kenya. He is the only healthcare provider for 8000 people. He must rely on the cleaner to help run the clinic. WHO recommends an average of 25 nurses per 10,000 people, Kenya barely has 8.

I do realize this is rather a grim note to start such a joyous occasion on, however it is with a purpose that I share these stories. Today, all of you sitting in this beautiful green regalia, are not only celebrating your hard work, blood sweat and tears, sacrifices and accomplishments – you are celebrating so much more. You are celebrating the hope you symbolize for Ayesha, Simoni and Njugana (jookuna) and thousands of others. You are celebrating being change makers and leaders in the nations that built you and now need you, and in a world currently facing its worst humanitarian crisis in our lifetime with COVID-19. Now more than ever before, the world needs doctors, nurses and midwives, it needs educationists and journalists, it needs health system experts and epidemiologists it needs men and women like YOU to change the landscape; to ensure that such suffering ceases to exist and to ensure that we as nations and as humanity are better prepared. Why am I so confident that you and I are so instrumental and can be this momentous change?

That is because over the years I have grown old with many of you. I have learnt first-hand what the Aga Khan Student embodies. Commitment, leadership, talent. The Aga Khan Student is simply amongst the best. But that is not all I learnt over the years. The time was also filled with days sneaking in and out of lecture halls, hysterically laughing on exam nights, spending hours on end at the Sports Centre. There were also the tougher days where a patient’s father grabbed your hand crying, begging, pleading with you to save their child and even days where you accidentally prescribe an EEG instead of an ECG. All these days – the happy, the sad, the grueling, the gratifying – have culminated in so many memories and a much deserved today.

None of this would exist without the security guards, housekeeping staff, librarians, cooks, administration – thank you for making every day possible. Thank you to the phenomenal faculty. Thank you to the friends like family. Thank you to those who are probably happier than we are right now – our loved ones and relatives; especially our parents; today is as much yours as it is ours. And, finally, thank you to the man who built our futures, His Royal Highness The Chancellor.

Before I end, I would like to leave you with two ideas. Family and hope. Today we are not the Aga Khan University Nairobi or Kenya or Uganda or UK or Pakistan, we are simply the Aga Khan University. The AKU family, inextricably linked to one another – and like every family it can be too much at times, but it will always have your back. And today, as we leave the nest, I have the audacity to hope. I am talking about the hope that we will always try our level best and if it is one life we save, one child we teach, one story we change – it is more than enough. It is the hope of a better future, together. Fellow graduates, especially over the past year, we have been living history, but I think it is high time that you and I go out there and start making some history. I cannot wait to see all that you achieve. Here is to new adventures.

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