

# Lofty ambition in Asia's mountain frontiers

With the Aga Khan's aid, the highlands of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic will soon boast an ambitious three-campus university.

**David Shariamadari** reports



Looking to the future: the city of Naryn in the Kyrgyz Republic, location of one of the university's three regional hubs

Building a new university from scratch is a mammoth undertaking. Building one from scratch in a poor, sparsely populated, mountainous corner of the former Soviet Union could be called folly.

Yet deep within Central Asia, in the countries of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, work is under way to build the new University of Central Asia.

Funded by the super-rich Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the Ismaili Muslim community, the university's ambitious aim is to bring cutting-edge higher education and research to often overlooked regions of the former Soviet Union.

The idea of the university crystallised in 1995 when President Emomali Rakhmonov of Tajikistan and the Aga Khan jointly vowed to create a research-active university with world-class facilities for the inhabitants of the region's mountain communities.

Bohdan Krawchenko, dean of the UCA, said: "The goal is not to be the best university in Central Asia because that is not a particularly difficult thing to achieve, but to be among the best internationally in the fields we want to offer. That is a very big challenge."

It is important to Professor Krawchenko, however, that the university's global goals do not overshadow one of the core purposes of the UCA, which is to provide high-level educational opportunities for local inhabitants.

One of the major issues in Central Asia is that existing higher education provision is based largely in regional capitals, far removed from the inhabitants

of isolated rural communities.

An additional challenge is the fact that higher education as offered in most institutions in the region has barely changed since Soviet days.

Despite impressive literacy figures and a high number of graduates, graduate unemployment levels are high. Observers argue that the unreformed university system is now not fit for purpose, if it ever was, in a post-Soviet environment.

Professor Krawchenko wants to build an institution that equips its students for the reality of life in the region. "We don't want to educate for unemployment, which is the case in universities in Central Asia today," he said.

"In Kyrgyzstan, 40,000 graduates hit the labour market every

year, and more than 90 per cent of them end up unemployed. That's a big responsibility for us, and we are structuring the curriculum so that students will be very competitive in the labour market."

The UCA's academic programmes have been drawn up with employability in mind, offering courses that should prove useful to the regional economies. Undergraduate, graduate, doctoral, research, distance-learning and economic development programmes will be offered.

"It's going to be highly integrative," Professor Krawchenko said. "The masters in economic development, for example, is a two-year programme. In the first year, students will have a core curriculum that includes economics, public policy, development, manage-

ment, financial analysis and interdisciplinary studies, which will bring in the historical and cultural context of the society. Most universities couldn't do this because it would involve too much cross-departmental co-operation."

For a man charged with building a university in environments that the most generous of observers would describe as challenging, Professor Krawchenko seems quietly confident. But then he has a record of accepting challenges. He is a Ukrainian-Canadian historian who was professor of interdisciplinary studies at the University of Alberta until 1991, when he moved to Ukraine to help set up an institute of public administration to assist in the post-Soviet transition.

The idea of a university in Central Asia has been circulating since the early 1990s, when Professor Krawchenko was in Kiev.

"The initial plan called for a university in Khorog [the administrative capital of one of Tajikistan's main regions]," he said. "But it became clear that there was a lot of interest elsewhere, so the idea evolved. Rather than have one university with branches in other countries, it was decided to create one university with three campuses."

The governments of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan became involved, and in 2000 they signed a treaty with the Aga Khan

that was ratified by the national parliaments and registered with the UN.

Unsurprisingly, in such remote and difficult terrain ideas can take a long time to realise. Although

the treaty was signed seven years ago, the logistics of planning and building a three-campus university in this part of the world have meant that work has only just got under way. The university is not due to open for business until 2011.

Another reason for the delay is the care and attention being lavished on the institution, with facilities overseen by award-winning Japanese architect Arata Isozaki.

The UCA, said Professor Krawchenko, is borrowing the best design and the most innovative academic practice from universities elsewhere in the world.

Identifying and hiring the academic staff is another major challenge. The intention is that the bulk of the first generation of academics will be local students who are currently enrolled in masters and PhD programmes in Europe, North America and elsewhere.

Professor Krawchenko was in Europe recently to firm up arrangements for scholarships for students he hopes will go on to become academics at UCA.

The university's regional ethos means that not only academic staff but also the bulk of campus

construction workers must come from the region as far as possible. According to the conditions laid down by the Aga Khan, 80 per cent of employees must be local.

However, the concern is that once the UCA is running, it could become a victim of its own success, producing highly employable graduates who will leave to seek jobs outside the region.

Professor Krawchenko said: "The issue is, what can we do to encourage students to stay? Part of the answer is the way we design our undergraduate and graduate programmes, which are geared to existing labour market needs."

"Also, we place great emphasis on entrepreneurship in our programmes because the point is to create your own jobs and not just to accept those that exist."

"We also have a curious situation in Central Asia where, although there is substantial unemployment, there is actually a shortage of qualified personnel because existing educational institutions are not filling the needs. We see this as a major niche and have done our market research."

"Of course there will be emigration — it happens everywhere — but a hefty proportion will remain," Professor Krawchenko said.

Social problems, the lack of infrastructure and the remoteness are all major challenges to be overcome in establishing the UCA but, its dean believes, the people of Central Asia are willing one of the world's most unlikely universities to succeed.

## THREE LOCATIONS, ONE BOLD VISION

■ The University of Central Asia was established by international treaty in 2000

■ UCA is a secular, private university with a needs-blind admission process

■ Campuses are now being built at three regional hubs: Khorog in Tajikistan, Naryn in the Kyrgyz Republic

and Tekeli in Kazakhstan

■ UCA's School of Professional and Continuing Education is, with the Aga Khan Foundation, teaching English across the region to prepare young people for admission to UCA, where English will be the language of instruction for degree courses

■ Non-degree courses will be offered in Russian and in Kazakh, Kyrgyz or Tajik

■ Funding comes from the Aga Khan and other international donors and philanthropists

■ The university hopes to accept its first undergraduate and graduate students in the 2011-12 academic year