

**Speech by Salim Bhatia at the Aga Khan Academy Graduation ceremonies  
in Hyderabad and Mombasa  
25 May 2019**



Distinguished Guests, families, colleagues and members of the Graduating Class of 2019,

This year, I have the privilege of congratulating our 159 graduates in Hyderabad and Mombasa, who will hopefully indulge me as I take advantage of this opportunity to share a few thoughts while they are still officially Academies' students.

Before doing so though, I would like to recognise some of the very important people who have made this day possible for our graduates.

Clearly, that starts with His Highness the Aga Khan and his vision for this ambitious programme of an integrated network of Academies, launched just over fifteen years ago.

His Highness' remarkable vision has enabled, and will continue to enable, meritorious students to access education of the highest international standard, regardless of their culture, religion, language or family's financial circumstances.

I would like to recognise our Heads of Academy – Alison Hampshire in Mombasa for whom this is the first Academy graduation and Dr Geoff Fisher in Hyderabad for whom this is the fifth and last, as he goes on to pursue new adventures in the up-coming school year.

I would like to recognise our teachers, school leaders and support staff. Their work in our classrooms, on our playing fields, around the campus, in workshops and at meetings, all has one essential goal – to ensure that our Academies' students receive the best education we can give you, including through the latest innovations in teaching and learning.

Beyond the Academy gates, we are grateful for the commitment our parents have made, not only to their own children's minds and futures, but also to the betterment of the societies in which they live.

We also sincerely appreciate our alumni, our volunteers and other supporters here and across the globe whose generous gifts of time, knowledge and financial assistance for the Aga Khan Academies mean that we can realise His Highness' vision to select and support talented students to attend our Academies, independent of their families' means.

Please join me in thanking and applauding all of these people who have helped make today a reality for our 2019 graduates.

Today, at our Academy in Hyderabad or here in Mombasa, one of these 159 Academies' graduates will be the one thousandth young person to receive an Aga Khan Academies' diploma. I'm sure that you will agree that one thousand is a pretty impressive number, and one thousand graduates represents a significant achievement for our growing network.

Our culture recognises the value of one thousand as being more than simply a number change from three digits to four.

One thousand is considered a major milestone.  
In time, we call it a 'millennium'.  
In money, we call it a 'grand'.  
In science, it even has its own prefix – 'kilo'.  
We say that a successful person is 'batting a thousand',  
that 'a picture is worth a thousand words', and  
that 'the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step'.

Of course, a favourite of both parents and teachers alike seems to be, "if I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times..."

To be honest with you, I could have looked at our list of graduates in Hyderabad and in Mombasa, taken into account the precise timing of the graduation ceremonies, and figured out exactly which one of you is number one thousand.

However, I did not do that, because one thousand is not one of you, it's all of you.

One thousand is not impressive because of the one that takes the number from 999 to one thousand but because of all of the individual 'ones' that built up to one thousand and the immensity it represents as a total quantity.

When thinking about our Academies' graduates and this milestone in our development as a network, I couldn't help but think of American author C.S. Lewis who first wrote the phrase a "thousand points of light", which later re-emerged in popular culture in a speech by former U.S. President George H.W. Bush.

In both instances, the "a thousand points of light" referred to the stars in the sky. A thousand points of light – it's such a vivid image, and we can all picture in our minds the beauty of a starry night, with all those points of light, against the backdrop of the infinitely dark sky.

The more I thought about it though, and the more I thought about you, our graduates, the less I felt that those thousand points of light in a faraway night sky represented you.

While vivid and beautiful, when I stand here on the ground, the sky seems so far away. And when we study the sky in astronomy, we realise those points of light are even further away than we see with our eyes.

However, you, Academies' graduates, are not far away. You are here.

Some of our previous graduates are also here with us today to celebrate this momentous occasion.

In all of you, I do not see far-off points of light but instead nearby beacons of hope.

- Beacons of hope who have been educated to the highest of international standards.
- Beacons of hope who, while highly talented and meritorious, demonstrate personal humility in their thoughts and deeds.
- Beacons of hope who not only respect, but also embrace, diversity.
- Beacons of hope who are making a difference in the countries where they are studying and then returning home to make a difference there.
- Beacons of hope who are living alongside their neighbours and fellow citizens, trying to make this planet a better place for all, wherever they may be.

You are not points of light that simply add beauty to the darkness but beacons of hope who possess a social conscience and lead by example.

You are beacons of hope who inspire, encourage and care.

Graduating in this Class of 2019, which includes the one thousandth Academies' graduate, is especially exciting since the next big milestone like this will be 10,000 Academies' alumni.

And, while that is closer than we think with Maputo and Dhaka soon graduating students, it still seems far away.

But, really, beyond being a big number, what does reaching one thousand Academies' alumni really mean?

As His Highness the Aga Khan said at the 2013 inauguration of the Aga Khan Academy Hyderabad, "Our engagement in education has been a long, continuing story. It is a hopeful and exciting story, a story of expanding impact all around the world."

If we look at one thousand Academies' alumni with regards to expanding impact, this impressive number means that we visibly have a critical mass.

For those of you who have studied physics, you will recall that a critical mass is the minimum amount of material needed to maintain a nuclear chain reaction.

As you know, the business world has co-opted the phrase to refer to the minimum size required to maintain a venture.

For our network of Aga Khan Academies, a critical mass means that we now have enough alumni out in the world continuing in their tertiary studies or in employment, to diffuse and prove the concepts that first inspired His Highness the Aga Khan's vision for our schools.

It means that you, our beacons of hope, are putting into practice what you have learned as members of the Aga Khan Academies about the values we hold dear, including pluralism, ethics and civic engagement.

Graduates, I conclude my remarks today by challenging you to take that social conscience that you have developed as an Academies' student to wherever your path may take you.

Your parents, your teachers, your fellow classmates, as well as those who have come before you and those who will follow you – all of us, in fact – are counting on you.

You will shape the future of our society and world, and we all have great faith in your ability to rise to that challenge and make a positive impact on humanity.

You, members of the Class of 2019, give us hope. Congratulations to you all!

Read online: <https://www.akdn.org/speech/salim-bhatia/aga-khan-academy-graduation-ceremonies-hyderabad-and-mombasa>