



**Asian University for Women
Graduation of the Inaugural Access Academy Class
8 July 2009, Chittagong, Bangladesh**

The members of the inaugural class of the Access Academy celebrated their graduation at the Hotel Peninsula in Chittagong on 8 July 2009. The occasion marked the end of fifteen months of rigorous preparation for the coming undergraduate program at the Asian University for Women (AUW). The graduation ceremony honored the students' achievement as well as provided an opportunity for students, teachers, and administrators alike to express their gratitude to those who contributed to the success of the very first year of the Access Academy.

In her welcome speech, Dr. Hoon Eng Khoo, Acting Vice-Chancellor and Provost of AUW, recounted the achievements of the students. Dr. Khoo cited several examples where the young women who came to the Access Academy with only basic English skills progressed so much during their time there that they were able to go to places such as Dubai and Tokyo and speak confidently about their lives and ambitions to large groups of people. Dr. Khoo also reported that all the girls in the Karate Club had earned their blue and brown belts, and she challenged them to earn their black belts in the next year.

Afterwards, Dr. Khoo read the messages of two people who, regrettably, could not attend: Mr. Jack Meyer, chairman of the board of the AUW Support Foundation (AUWSF), and Mr. Kamal Ahmad, President and CEO of AUWSF, and the founder of AUW. Mr. Meyer encouraged the girls to continue being pioneers by quoting the American poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." Meanwhile, Mr. Ahmad thanked the students for their courage and persistence; the students' parents, who trusted AUW to educate their daughters; and the Access Academy teachers for their "relentless hard work and for the love they carried... for all the souls that made this program possible."

Economist and international human rights expert Ms. Salma Khan was the keynote speaker at the event. Ms. Khan currently serves as the President for the organization for Women: A Research and Study Group. She is also the Chairperson and Project Coordinator of Coalition of Beijing Plus Five, a coalition of over 624 NGO's committed to establishing human rights for Bangladeshi women. She observed that most of the graduating students became examples of empowered women by joining AUW. She said to them: "You represent the model of aspiring women... By joining Asian University for Women, you have decided to assist agency of women in Asia in the face all odds. The education you are receiving here provides you a critical pathway to leadership development to transform your families, communities and societies."

Following Ms. Khan's speech, Ms. Zarina Hossain, Interim Dean of the Access Academy, said a few words about the preparations for the students' arrival last year. She observed that despite the emphasis placed on academic and residential space, "a building is just a building," and that it was the people that made the school come alive. Together with Mr. Omar Shareef, AUW's Director of Operations, and Dr. Khoo, Ms. Hossain recognized the WorldTeach volunteers who had dedicated the past fifteen months to teaching the students English, computer skills, logical reasoning and critical thinking skills, while also empowering their young charges, helping them to become more self-assured.



Ms. Jill Davis and Ms. Selena Pang, who helped initiate the Student Government, remained onstage to present the Student Government leaders and the members of the various Ministries. Ms. Davis joked that she and Ms. Pang were “gargoyles... we sit and only speak when necessary.” They praised the student leaders for their discipline, organization, and collaborative efforts at improving student life.

The members of Student Government then came forward to make a presentation for their teachers—an slideshow using pictures of their teachers taken throughout the year and a half of the Access Academy program. The slideshow was accompanied by the song, “You Raise Me Up,” which included lyrics that captured how the students felt about their teachers: “You raise me up to more than I can be.” At this point in the ceremony, members of the Graduation Planning Committee went up and down the aisles distributing tissues to students, teachers, and audience members alike.

The teachers had also prepared something for their students. They came in pairs to talk about the qualities they recognized in their students: humor, courage, integrity, and strength. Ms. Amy Lam, last to speak, spoke passionately about how the students should stand up to anyone who calls them weak, and to say, “I am an Asian woman, and I make dreams come true.”

Finally, it was time for the presentation of the diplomas. The 129 young students, who came from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, lined up to receive the certificates that certified their completion of the Access Academy program. The students were resplendent in their saris, shalwar kameez, and other native costumes, glowing as they came on stage to receive their diplomas from Dr. Khoo and A UW embroidered silk scarves from Dr. Dil Afroze Qader, the first Executive Director of the Access Academy.

To conclude the graduation ceremony, Dr. Michelle Zjhra, Dean of Undergraduate Studies, thanked everyone who supported the Asian University for Women. There was a “handing over” ceremony where the Access Academy teachers “entrusted” the students to the A UW faculty by presenting them with a small banyan tree. The banyan tree symbolizes knowledge and wisdom, and is a tree under which the Buddha is said to have meditated to gain enlightenment. The new faculty pledged to nurture the minds of the inaugural class of Access Academy students, who would now be under their care as the first batch of undergraduate students at A UW.

Ms. Annie Hsu, Chief of Staff in the Office of the Provost, and also Head of the Graduation Ceremony Planning Committee, was pleased with the ceremony and with the achievements of the students and teachers. She said: “The Graduation Ceremony was beautiful. It was certainly an intensely emotional day. Students expressed their heartfelt gratitude to their beloved teachers, who poured their hearts and souls into teaching and mentoring the students. The Ceremony was both a celebratory conclusion to the students’ Access Academy education, and the commencement of a new chapter in their A UW lives.

A big thank you to all A UW staff who made this program a success!”