

Identifying Talent to Produce Home-Grown Leadership

The Aga Khan Academies are an integrated network of 18 days and residential schools (K-12) being established by His Highness the Aga Khan in countries across Africa, South and Central Asia, and the Middle East.



Asma enjoying study time with fellow students

ALIA DHARSSI

The Academies select exceptional girls and boys based on merit, regardless of socio-economic background, and provide them with a high-quality, international standard of education, with an emphasis on leadership development, ethics, pluralism and social responsibility.

“The key to future progress in the developing world will be its ability to identify, to develop, and to retain expert and effective home-grown leadership,” said His Highness the Aga Khan at the Foundation Ceremony for the Aga Khan Academy in Hyderabad, India, in 2006.

“The well-led society of the future, in my view will be a meritocracy – where leadership roles are based on personal and intellectual excellence,” he added. “Our goal, then, is not to provide special education for a privileged elite – but to provide an exceptional education for the truly exceptional.”

In an effort to develop such home-grown leadership, the Aga Khan Academies network of schools run an intensive talent identification programme to detect bright students from

diverse backgrounds. The programme looks for top grade 6 students with exceptional intellectual ability and leadership potential.

Identifying future leaders is a challenge. The Academies aren't simply looking for students who are at the top of their class, but for those with leadership capacity – a quality that can be difficult to discern in a child. The admissions process is made more challenging by the Academies' commitment to provide students from rural and marginalised backgrounds with an opportunity to obtain admission.

To identify talented students from these communities, the Academy in Mombasa, Kenya reaches out to networks of government and not-for-profit schools, including those benefiting from other Aga Khan Development Network programmes, for nominations of outstanding students.

Those who demonstrate the qualities the Academy seeks – intellectual drive and curiosity, leadership potential, and good character – are invited to go through a secondary assessment process involving

a range of activities, including creative and personal writing, problem-solving tasks, another interview and a dynamic assessment. The latter gives students opportunities to respond to instructions and show how quickly they learn. These assessments are done in English or in the local language.

“We are not just looking at prescribed learning, but taking into account how the students think and their creative thinking capacity,” said Paul Davis, Dean of Admissions.

The range of assessments enables the team to piece together a holistic picture of each student and identify his or her academic and leadership potential, regardless of previous educational preparation. The multifaceted process highlights the strengths of students who wouldn't necessarily do well on traditional school entrance exams.

Each year, a selection of students from rural and marginalised communities receive scholarships to the Academy for up to seven years. Scholarship recipients display high levels of intellectual aptitude and leadership skills from a young age, even though many of them come from families that struggle to put food on the table or keep a roof over their heads. They include students such as Maxwin Oj'wang, who lives with six other family members in a two-room house in a Mombasa slum. Before he was identified by the Academy for his sharp analytical skills, mathematical acumen and compassion, he attended a primary school that did not have enough seats for its students.

Similarly, aspiring accountant Elizabeth Wanjiku comes from a home with no running water or electricity that is headed by a single mother who struggles to make ends meet by selling chapati and beans. Elizabeth has always been highly motivated and talented academically and recalls working diligently to improve her grammar, even in Kindergarten.

The talent identification programme enables the Academy to draw together students from all corners of Kenyan society. The Aga Khan Academies network is on the way to achieving a student body where 50% are on some level of financial aid. The network also ensures an equitable gender balance – currently, slightly more than half of Academies students are female. At each Academy, students learn with others of diverse backgrounds. Students from well-to-do families are friends with those who receive substantial scholarship support. Students of different faiths and cultures, from various provinces and countries, live and learn together. They also participate and take on leadership roles in a variety of extracurricular activities, ranging from sailing to Model United Nations.

Students such as Asma, a scholarship student from Garissa in Northern Kenya, seize upon the leadership roles offered. Inspired by the opportunity she has been given, Asma promotes education among girls in her home community, telling them about how it's possible for girls to be leaders and why it's important for them to get an education. ■