

## **AUB President Fadlo R. Khuri**

### **Next Step Graduation**

**October 27, 2020**

Good afternoon and welcome to this very special event where we celebrate the achievement of a group of remarkable new AUB alumni—the first cohort of graduates of the Next Step program.

These wonderful, enthusiastic, and talented young people once had the doors of opportunity closed to them; they were denied educational pathways to help them lead independent, rewarding, and productive lives. This was not because they were not able to learn—on the contrary, it was because the society around did not recognize both their drive and their ability to learn.

Now thanks to a groundbreaking partnership between AUB’s Continuing Education Center, the Lebanese Down Syndrome Association, the Diet Center, Heritage College in Beirut, and the OpenMinds fund at the AUBMC Special Kids Clinic, we are present today to bear witness to the transformation that education can bring, and the life-changing effect it has brought to the Next Step graduates, their families, and everyone who has been touched by this outstanding program.

Next Step is life-centered educational route to a more abundant life, just as AUB’s motto “that they may have life and have it more abundantly” applies to all its students. Next Step students have developed confidence, have learned by doing, and have pushed themselves beyond their boundaries so they can flourish as independent adults in charge of their own lives and making their own choices. In Next Step, they are not weighed down by pity or wrapped in a protective blanket, but are challenged and empowered and their genuine achievements are recognized; they are treated with respect; and they acquire the tools and skills they need to live their lives, just like any other AUB student.

Before the disruptions of this academic year, I know that many AUB faculty, staff, and students delighted in the encounters that enabled them to get to know their Next Step colleagues on campus. Unfortunately, that could not continue during the coronavirus epidemic and we have missed you, just as we have missed all AUB students. However, the outstanding graduates sitting here today not only adapted to online education as well as any AUB student, but also they learned important new skills, mastering new computer software and showing total commitment and enthusiasm for the online learning setting that has become the global reality in 2020.

Today we welcome you back to mark the crowning of your AUB career with a graduation certificate that you and your parents can be truly proud of and which we hope will open more doors for you as your lives unfold. You will always be part of AUB; this great university will never

forget your presence among us, and that you made us a better more inclusive university. We shall always look forward to warmly welcoming you back on campus.

Society is better for everyone when each member of society is offered the chance to contribute. We are all better off thanks to the work of the Next Step program, its hard-working and determined students—now graduates—and the wonderful team of educators, volunteers, and administrators who have created this outstanding and pioneering program. A special note of thanks must go to Ms. Hana Abukhadra Salem whose vision of opening an educational opportunity like this at AUB has made an indelible mark on so many people’s lives. But this was truly a team effort from everyone involved and without that effort we would not be here today.

Thank you Hana and the Next Step team, thank you graduates, and many congratulations to you and your families.