

FAFS Graduation Reception and Awards Ceremony

Keynote Speaker Ms. Soha Frem Karam

Good evening everyone,

President, Dean, faculty members, families, friends, and most importantly, dear graduates,

Standing here tonight is deeply humbling and emotional for me.

Exactly 20 years ago, I sat where you are sitting today - proud, ambitious, and honestly... slightly terrified of the future.

At the time, I could not have imagined that my path would take me from studying landscape design and agriculture at AUB, to working in international development across the Arab region, to becoming a stage director for some of the world's biggest celebrations and eventually back to the mountains, orchards, and apple trees of Lebanon to create WATA Cider.

If there is one thing, I hope you leave with tonight, is this: Life is rarely linear. And that is not something to fear. Because sometimes, the most beautiful journeys are the ones we never planned.

You are graduating at a very particular moment in history.

Your generation has grown up through crises that many generations before you did not have to face all at once: economic collapse, pandemics, wars, displacement, climate anxiety, and now the rapid transformation brought by artificial intelligence and technological acceleration.

For many young people today, the future no longer feels predictable. The old formula - study hard, get a stable job, follow a straight path - no longer feels guaranteed. And yet, I believe that your generation possesses something incredibly powerful: adaptability. Because, you have learned to navigate uncertainty earlier than most. You have learned to reinvent yourselves again and again.

You have learned to move forward and be productive despite instability. You are strong. And in our modern world, a world without boundaries that never pauses, you will need to keep adapting and pushing yourselves forward. And while you search for your path, and you will find it, keep three things close to your heart: the virtues of the land and agriculture, mentors who will guide you, and friendships that will carry you far beyond these walls.

Land and Agriculture teach us something that modern society often forgets that growth is never instant. It is not in a scroll, nor measured by likes, nor reduced to a

fleeting story. Real growth takes time.

Agriculture teaches patience in a world obsessed with speed. It teaches endurance in a culture of immediacy.

It teaches humility, because no matter how advanced we become, we remain dependent on seasons, ecosystems, water, soil, and one another.

It is about understanding life systems. It is about understanding interdependence and that no one truly grows alone; my growth is deeply connected to your growth...

Let me tell you my little WATA story.

When I began building WATA, many people questioned the idea.

A Lebanese cider? From Lebanese apples? In a country where cider culture was almost nonexistent?

And honestly, on paper, it did not seem very rational.

But WATA was personal. I spent my summers at my grandparents' apple orchards in Wata El Jawz, and that is where my connection to the land — and to apples — truly began.

With time, I also witnessed the challenges facing the apple industry in Lebanon. I saw orchards being abandoned, apple trees being cut down, and families slowly drifting away from the land. At the same time, I saw how cider around the world was evolving into something modern, refined, and cool.

And I kept asking myself: if Lebanon can produce great wines that are recognized around the world, why couldn't we also produce a great cider from our apples? and support our industry and the livelihood of so many...

So, I left the UN where I was working at that time and found myself in the farms of Gloucestershire in England to learn about the craft of cider making. And somewhere along the journey, I realized something important: people are not only hungry for products. They are hungry for meaning. They want connection. They want to feel rooted in something real.

That became the foundation of WATA: a brand rooted in land, community, and identity. What began as a personal story became the first Lebanese cider brand to build a cider market in Lebanon and later, to put Lebanon on the map of the best cider producers in the world.

Remember this: there is economic value in meaning. To distinguish yourselves in today's competitive landscape, you will need to learn how to combine purpose with productivity.

As a farmer, you need to understand branding.

As an engineer, you need to understand storytelling.

As a scientist, you need to understand psychology.

And as an entrepreneur, you need to understand people and community.

The list is endless, and the number of possible connections and combinations is infinite. This is exactly where innovation happens, at the intersection of disciplines, experiences, and ways of thinking.

And we, as Lebanese, are uniquely positioned to create those connections beyond the obvious. Why? Because Lebanon, despite all its challenges, still offers something rare to those willing to truly see it: beauty, depth, and human connection.

Lebanon is not a limitation. Your roots are not a limitation. They can become your greatest assets. In a world that is becoming increasingly standardized, and homogeneous, authenticity becomes rare. And what is rare becomes valuable.

No matter where you end up in this world, stay true to yourselves, have the courage to stay connected to what makes you feel alive, have the courage to build meaning in whatever you do, and never, never forget the virtues of the land and of agriculture.

In this journey, you are not meant to grow alone, seek mentors. Surround yourselves with people who challenge you, inspire you, and expand your way of thinking. Not only those who are successful, but those who are generous with their knowledge, grounded in their values, and honest in their guidance.

Mentors will not always give you the answers. But they will often help you ask better questions, avoid unnecessary detours, and continue believing in yourselves when you may struggle to do so.

Today, I would especially like to acknowledge our faculty professors and teachers. Beyond academics, they helped shape the way we think, question, and engage with the world. They transmitted not only knowledge, but also values, discipline, and reassurance in moments of doubt.

Professors, Thank you...

And last but not least, hold tightly to your friendships. While today is a celebration of your achievement, it is also a celebration of the people who walked this journey beside you - your friends.

Because perhaps one of the greatest gifts AUB gives you is the friendships you build along the way. The people sitting next to you in classrooms, under the Ficus trees, during late-night submissions, moments of stress, laughter, and excitement.

Life will eventually take each of you in different directions. But years from now, when you look back at your time at AUB, you may not remember every lecture, every exam, or every grade. But you will remember the conversations, the sense of belonging, the feeling of possibility that existed on this campus, and the friends who helped shape the person you became.

Over time, you will realize that meaningful friendships become anchors in moments of change, and that success means very little if it is not shared with friends who truly know you.

Hold on to the friends who make you laugh harder and make life feel lighter and meaningful at the same time. Dear graduates, you are entering the world at a challenging time. But also at an incredibly important one.

The world needs people capable of rebuilding systems more sustainably, more ethically, and more humanely. And perhaps that is why your education matters so much today. Because whether you become scientists, entrepreneurs, researchers, policy makers, farmers, innovators, or storytellers, you carry with you something essential: an understanding that life depends on relationships.

Tonight is not only the end of your studies. It is the beginning of your responsibility.

To build thoughtfully. To build courageously. And to build with enough humanity that others may flourish around you.

Congratulations Class of 2026.

May you grow deeply, courageously, and freely.

Thank you.

About the Speaker:

Ms. Soha Frem Karam is an entrepreneur, agricultural advocate, and proud FAFS alumna, where she was honored with the Penrose Award. She also holds a Master's degree in Development Studies from the London School of Economics and has worn many hats throughout her career.

Soha has worked with governmental institutions and UN agencies on socio-economic development in the Arab region and led major post-Beirut blast reconstruction initiatives focusing on the rehabilitation of healthcare infrastructure and micro-businesses.

She was part of the creative teams behind numerous large-scale ceremonies, most notably the Olympic Games in Vancouver, London, Sochi, and Rio de Janeiro, contributing across multiple roles including mass choreography, stage direction and production.

In response to Lebanon's apple crisis in 2019, she founded WATA Cider in her family's four-generation orchard in Mount Lebanon, transforming challenge into opportunity and helping place Lebanon on the map of the world's cider producers.

Her story is a reminder that impact and meaningful change often begins when people choose to create, rebuild, persevere, and believe, even in uncertain times.