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## Interview with Rob Quinn, Director of the Scholars at Risk Network



The Press Office of the Global Campus of Human Rights had the opportunity to ask questions to the Director of the Scholars at Risk (SAR) Network Rob Quinn about the work of the organisation and the

possibilities to establish cooperation with our institution regarding initiatives for afghan scholars.

**Could you tell us more about the main objectives of your organisation Scholars at Risk (SAR) Network at the international level?**

Our full name is "Scholars at Risk Network," emphasis on network. Our main objective is to link up higher education institutions, leaders, academics, staff and students in the promotion and defence of academic freedom. Notice I say "link up". Our project is not about conversion, not about convincing people. We know that there are already people in higher education communities all over the world who believe in academic freedom, and understand why it matters. And we have known from the very beginning that universities have always taken in refugee or exiled colleagues facing threats. Our job at Scholars at Risk is to connect with these organic, local efforts; to link them in the form of a global network; and together to bring support to those in places where colleagues and academic freedom are under the most pressure.

**How do you see the situation of academic freedom around the world and how could be improved?**

Thinking about threats to academic freedom there are the chronic and the acute. The chronic are always there, because there is a natural tension between power and ideas. Healthy societies harness that tension for discovery, creativity, and innovation that serves the public good. Unhealthy societies reject that tension, and repress scholars and students rather than embrace change. The chronic pressures are always there, but today they are growing. We see this in the movement toward authoritarianism, illiberalism, and polarization even in previously fairly healthy democratic states including Hungary, Poland, and the United States. The chronic threats must be addressed by practicing good hygiene, meaning regularly and publicly discussing the importance of academic freedom, building affirmative practices that implement fundamental values in the daily lives of our institutions, and building vocabularies and cultures of respect that make addressing the inevitable academic freedom disputes easier and more constructive. Then there are the acute crises, which can happen anywhere, in which crisis-level threats emerge and threaten to destroy significant proportions of a higher education community. In recent years these have included Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and now Afghanistan. The acute threats require a massive mobilization of the international higher education community, to come together in solidarity to support the most threatened colleagues, and in doing so to stand firmly and publicly in support of academic freedom. Such a response is happening now with Afghanistan. And importantly, it is not purely altruistic. If we as a community do not mobilize to respond to these acute crises, we run the risk that they will spread. We can defend academic freedom where it is most at risk today, or we can wait until the risk is closer to home, but by then it will be very late.

**Please tell us about the situation of Afghanistan in particular and which were the results and advances regarding the emergency appeal coordinated by SAR?**

The situation is still very uncertain. There is limited information, and a great number of decisions have yet to be made by the new authorities. What we know is that the situation for universities, scholars, and students in the country thus far is very difficult, and for women and girls, very grim. We can hope that the Taliban authorities will moderate their historical and still stated positions that threaten to destroy two decades of investment in Afghan higher education and society. But until we see responsible policies in place, including full security guarantees for staff and students, especially women and girls, then we must assume that the threat will continue for some time. This is why we are so grateful for the extraordinary, but not surprising, response from our global network. We put out a call asking whether institutions would consider hosting Afghan colleagues, and hundreds have come forward to say yes, we want to help. And I believe many more would yet still come forward if we ask. But for now the challenge is in identifying safe and effective pathways for scholars to exit Afghanistan, transit in third countries, and enter countries in Europe, North America, or elsewhere to take up temporary positions arranged through our network or by

one of our partner programs. We are hopeful that such pathways will become clearer in the coming weeks and months, in which case we will be able to help many Afghan scholars. And we have a special plea to any institutions in the GCHR network of partners, especially those in the global south: Please let us know if you would consider hosting one or more Afghan colleagues (or perhaps colleagues fleeing Yemen or other acute crisis countries). Knowing that a university or college is interested is the first step in a conversation that can lead to delivering meaningful help to a threatened scholar. But we can't do it without that first step.

**In your opinion creating synergies to help Afghan scholars would be a possible first step of cooperation between SAR and the Global Campus of Human Rights?**

Yes! We would love to build a working partnership with the GCHR community. It is clear that the values of SAR and the values of the GCHR are the same, so it is only natural to find ways to cooperate on practical activities. Hosting threatened scholars is one, but there are many others ways. SAR has advocacy programs for faculty and students to engage in human rights advocacy on behalf of scholars-in-prison and for academic freedom generally before international human rights bodies like the UN HPR and UNESCO, among others. We also have trainings, webinars, conferences and publications on academic freedom and promoting higher education values that may be of interest and use to GCHR members. Another option is for SAR and the GCHR to enter a "partner network" arrangement, a cooperative agreement that allows sharing of information and opportunities across our networks. Whatever way works for the GCHR we are happy to explore together-- as I said early, our main objective is to link up.

**Could you give a personal message to students, professors, partners and staff of the Global Campus of Human Rights?**

First, I would say congratulations! You have found the GCHR, and you have centered the study and practice of human rights in your intellectual and personal lives! In a world full of injustice and conflict, centering human rights is essential to our personal and collective wellbeing. Second, I would say do not be discouraged. There is a lot of injustice and conflict. Structural systems that offend human rights are difficult to change. But looking through the long lens, there has never been a better time to work for human rights. We have never been more connected. We have never had greater transparency and awareness of each other's lives and challenges. And we have never had more people engaged together in human rights work. So I say congratulations, and keep going. And let's link up!

Photo credit: Fred Siegel/SAR

For more information contact our [Press Office](#)

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