

# SCHOLARS AT RISK

N E T W O R K

Via email to: [registry@ohchr.org](mailto:registry@ohchr.org)  
OHCHR-United Nations Office at Geneva,  
CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

March 6, 2015

## Re: The University & the Role of Prevention in the Promotion & Protection of Human Rights

Dear OHCHR colleagues:

This letter brief responds to the questionnaire concerning Human Rights Council resolution 24/16 on “The role of prevention in the promotion and protection of human rights.” Rather than addressing actions or problems in particular States, we wish to bring attention to the role of the university space in preventing human rights violations and promoting wide recognition of and protection for human rights. By doing so, we wish to call attention for the urgent need to increase protection for universities and their constituents so they might fulfill this important function.

Throughout the world, the university space is uniquely important in reducing conflict, building awareness of human rights principles, modeling democratic cooperation, and thus preventing human rights violations. Healthy higher education communities equip society with the skills to appreciate the complexities of human rights as universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. They foster wider understanding of fundamental human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination, respect for diversity, tolerance and intercultural dialogue.

Most importantly, healthy higher education communities model and implant in society a democratic **“knowledge-over-force” principle**: they model and teach the rejection of violence and force as determinants of outcomes, in favor of process, evidence, reasoned discourse and quality. Where universities are given the space and security to thrive in this function, they can create a space—often one of the few such spaces in a society—where complex social and political tensions can be aired and resolved peacefully, mitigating or preventing conflict and human rights violations. Moreover, as inter-generational entities, serving both their present students and communities *and* successive future generations of students and community stakeholders, **universities are engines of prevention and rights promotion.**

Too often, however, universities attempting to play this constructive role are impeded by lack of security, autonomy and academic freedom:

- In 2014 alone, the Scholars at Risk<sup>i</sup> [Academic Freedom Monitor](#) documented 105 incidents involving attacks against higher education communities. These included 52 instances of killings, violence or disappearances; 24 instances of false imprisonment; 14 instances of wrongful prosecutions; 13 instances of loss of position; 4 instances of restrictions on travel; and 20 other types of attacks, such as university occupations and closures.

- Between 2012 and 2014, Scholars at Risk received reports of over 500 attacks on higher education communities in over 60 countries involving thousands of victims and hundreds of known or suspected perpetrators.
- In its report [Education Under Attack 2014](#), the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA)—of which Scholars at Risk is a member—found attacks on higher education facilities, staff and/or students, or military use of universities, in 28 of 30 countries covered between 2009 and 2012. Attacks damaged or destroyed higher education buildings in 17 of these countries during this period.

These represent only a tiny sampling of the overall number of attacks on higher education institutions, facilities and personnel that occur throughout the world. Beside constituting human rights violations themselves, these attacks—and the insecurity and vulnerability they engender—undermine the potential of the university to function as an engine for preventing human rights violations and promoting wide recognition of and protection for human rights.

**To capture the full potential universities as engines for preventing human rights violations, States must do more to guarantee that universities and their members are safe, secure and free from outside interference and all forms of intimidation and coercion.** Moreover, as documented in GCPEA’s report titled [Institutional Autonomy and the Protection of Higher Education from Attack](#), it is especially important that in providing such guarantees, States also ensure respect for core values of academic freedom and autonomy, without which the modern university cannot properly function.

To encourage further dialogue and positive action in this direction, Scholars at Risk, GCPEA and other coalition members, in consultation with higher education associations from Africa, Europe, the Middle East and the Americas, articulated a set of [Principles of State Responsibility to Protect Higher Education from Attack](#). These principles do not seek any new legal commitments, but rather merely reflect existing obligations relevant to protecting higher education, including especially under ICCPR Art. 19, ICESCR Art. 13, CESCR Gen. Comment No. 13, and relevant UNESCO statements (especially the 1997 UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel). **In the last year alone, these principles have been endorsed by associations representing over 1200 universities, 120,000 researchers, and 11 million students in 57 countries,** demonstrating both wide support and recognition of the problem of attacks on higher education warranting greater protection.

Scholars at Risk therefore respectfully urges the OHCHR, the Human Rights Council, and all UN Member States and related entities to recognize the full potential of universities as engines for preventing human rights violations and promoting wide recognition of and protection for human rights; to recognize that greater protection of higher education communities is required to capture that potential; and to publicly demonstrate support for the [Principles of State Responsibility to Protect Higher Education from Attack](#), including by:

- communicating support for these principles to their higher education sector, including institutions, staff and students; and encouraging other States to support these principles domestically and in appropriate inter-State relations;

- reviewing national policies and laws, in close cooperation with their higher education institutions and staff, and with due respect for the values essential to quality higher education, including especially institutional autonomy, academic freedom and social responsibility, to ensure that higher education communities are physically secure, and free from intimidation and improper external influence;
- reviewing emergency protection measures, and updating them as necessary, to ensure the security of higher education institutions and personnel against threats and future attacks; and
- taking all reasonable measures to assist victims and deter future attacks, including by conducting prompt, thorough and transparent investigations and holding perpetrators accountable in proceedings consistent with internationally recognized standards.

We welcome any opportunities for further dialogue and cooperative action with the OHCHR, the Human Rights Council, and all UN Member States and entities in this direction, and thank you for your consideration of this submission and the reports referenced.

Please feel free to contact me for further information at [rquinn@nyu.edu](mailto:rquinn@nyu.edu) or +1-212-998-2215.

Sincerely,



Robert Quinn  
Executive Director

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<sup>i</sup>*Scholars at Risk* is a network of higher education institutions and professionals in over 37 countries working to promote academic freedom and to defend the human rights of scholars worldwide. *Scholars at Risk* was granted Special Consultative Status with Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations in 2013 and Consultative Status with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2012.