

Share Your Stories:

VU University Amsterdam

SCHOLARS AT RISK
NETWORK



As a part of our 10th Anniversary, Scholars at Risk is compiling stories from scholars who have been helped and campus leaders, administrators, faculty, students and friends who open their hearts and homes to them. Please share your stories with us! Send us emails, letters, pictures, audio, video or whatever you have about how you or your campus has been involved in protecting scholars and promoting academic freedom.



Kees Kouwenaar first heard of the Scholars at Risk Network at a conference on international education in Antwerp, Belgium. As he listened to the stories of scholars whose lives and voices were saved by the Network, Kees saw an opportunity to anchor work his university was already engaged in, and to connect it to a larger global movement.

As the Director of the Center for International Cooperation at VU University Amsterdam, Kouwenaar oversaw a program called the "Academic Freedom Project." It provided three month sabbaticals in the Netherlands to academics from Baghdad University, with the hope that they would then be able to go back to help rebuild their institution, and eventually their country. "The program enabled us to build stronger links and collaboration with Baghdad University," Kouwenaar said, "and I think it played a role in helping to get the university back on its feet." The visits contributed to the academic capacity of the scholars and their university, but the effect on academic freedom in Iraq – the objective of the project - was less clear. Looking for ways to refocus on academic freedom, Kees found that one institution could only accomplish so much. "One single university is not so well positioned to really assess the position of at-risk scholars," Kees said. "Furthermore, when you encounter academics who are under threat, you feel a responsibility to make sure that they don't have to return. If you are part of a larger network this responsibility is shared... and you can feel confident there will be options for [the scholars] once their placements have finished. There will be somewhere for them to go."

Today, VU is playing an important role within the Dutch section of Scholars at Risk. Co-organized with Scholars at Risk and the University Assistance Fund, Netherlands (UAF), the Dutch section represents Dutch higher education institutions in the wider global SAR network, and coordinates lectures, conferences and hosting of at-risk scholars in the Netherlands. Already thirteen Dutch institutions have joined the section, and eleven scholars have been hosted.

VU University Amsterdam is among those exploring opportunities to host a SAR scholar on campus. But that is not all. In December, VU held an event on behalf of academics imprisoned for their work. A VU professor originally from Iran presented a short film, and students wrote letters and cards expressing support for imprisoned scholars and their families. Weeks later, the daughter of an imprisoned academic wrote back: "We received your cards [on behalf of our father]. It was so touching. We don't know what to say, there are no words to express our gratitude. Thank you so much."

As Kouwenaar and his colleagues have discovered, the problems of attacks on scholars at universities are real and long-term. But there are multiple ways to show solidarity and get involved in making a difference. "Even if you feel that your university is not fully ready to host [a long-term visitor], it is still a very good thing to join the network. There are smaller things that you can do to support the notion of academic freedom." And thanks to Kouwenaar and colleagues like him at VU and across the Netherlands, those smaller things are starting to add up.

To make a gift or learn more visit www.scholarsatrisk.org

Support SAR's 10th Anniversary Campaign

Please help us meet the needs of at-risk scholars today, while reducing the number of scholars needing protection tomorrow.

- \$10** Finds a host for an at-risk scholar through SAR's "Scholar-of-the-Week" email bulletin
- \$100** Drives a global letter-writing campaign to free a wrongly imprisoned scholar
- \$1,000** Reunites a scholar separated from a spouse or child through an Emergency Fund travel grant
- \$10,000** Defeats intellectual repression by supporting safe haven for an at-risk scholar
- Other** At whatever level, your support helps save lives and protects the right to think, to question and to express ideas freely, without fear.

To make a gift to SAR's 10th Anniversary Campaign by credit card visit www.scholarsatrisk.org or mail a check payable to "NYU/Scholars at Risk" to: Scholars at Risk, 194 Mercer Street, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10012 USA. Scholars at Risk is hosted by the Office of the Provost at New York University, a 501(c)(3) Tax-Exempt Organization. Donations are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.