

Introduction by Berend Jonker, Project Officer University Assistance Fund (UAF), on the occasion of the 15th Anniversary of the European Humanities University - Scholars at Risk Network meeting and Symposium "Defending the University: Academic Freedom in Central and Eastern Europe, Vilnius, Lithuania, June 20-21, 2008.

Ladies and gentlemen,

1. First of all I would like to thank the organizers for the opportunity to say a few words about the University Assistance Fund, a Dutch NGO that provides support to higher educated refugees, and our attempts to set up a partner-network of Scholars at Risk in the Netherlands. In this contribution I'll say a few words on

- I. the history of UAF
- II. the UAF programme
- III. the UAF/SAR partner network in the Netherlands

I. The history of UAF

2. The University Assistance Fund was established in 1948. An act triggered by the political turmoil in Eastern Europe: the communist 'take-over' staged in Czechoslovakia in February 1948. As political opponents were detained, scholars and students of the Karl University in Prague demonstrated - and were arrested themselves. Some were killed – many of them succeeded to get away and claimed asylum in the West, including the Netherlands. In April 1948, the Rectors of all Dutch Universities called a joint meeting. They established a Fund aimed at providing financial assistance to young Czech intellectuals wanting to complete their studies in the Netherlands.

3. Since then, UAF has supported thousands of young intellectuals forced to flee their countries because of well-founded fear of persecution. The Czechs from '48 were followed by the Hungarians in '56, a new group of Czechs in '68, Chileans in '73, Ethiopians and Eritreans in the seventies, Iranians and Iraqi in the eighties, Somali and Yugoslav refugees in the nineties. Nowadays, UAF supports around 2600 students from over 70 countries in the world.

4. In the five decades since, UAF has remained a private foundation largely independent from government funding. It is thanks to the donations of tens of thousands of private individuals -so thanks to civil society-, that refugee-students and scholars can be offered scholarships and grants.

II. The UAF programme

5. How do we provide assistance? Apart from financial aid (including tuition fees, travel expenses, book allowances and the like), UAF provides its clients with legal aid and student counseling. Through our Job Support scheme, we assist graduates and other higher educated refugees in finding suitable employment reflecting their skills and qualifications. Apart from that as a refugee organization we are involved in advocacy work and do a lot of lobbying at the national and European level. Former UN High Commissioner and former Dutch Prime-Minister Ruud Lubbers is at present Chair of the UAF-Board.
6. Of the 2600 clients, 600 are in their preparatory stage. They yet have to meet all the requirements imposed on those seeking admission to institutions of higher education. In most cases, language is the key issue, as students must have a good command of the Dutch language. In order to be admitted to the desired course, refugee-students may also have to update their knowledge in other fields. Some 600 graduates are supported by the Job Support scheme in finding a workplace compatible with their level of education.
7. The number of graduates five-folded over the last 10 years. At the end of last academic year over 246 refugees finished their studies at a Dutch university or a university of professional education. 292 found a suitable job and 118 an internship. The experience is that approx. 80% finds a suitable job in one year.

III. the UAF/SAR partner network in the Netherlands

- 8. UAF has been in contact with SAR since 2006. In 2007, UAF decided to create a project with the aim of setting up a partner network in the Netherlands in support of scholars at risk. We gave ourselves one year to get as many universities and possibly other higher educational institutions enthusiastic for this initiative. The project also includes researching what would be the best way to do this given the Dutch circumstances: what role should our organization play? Which model of cooperation with universities and SAR should we develop? How can universities organize the initiative within their institutions? How can other stakeholders be involved? What activities could be developed to support threatened scholars and promote academic freedom? Can we identify funding to support the initiative from 2009? And how can we use the media to seek positive publicity for the benefit of scholars at risk, the universities and our organization?**
- 9. After my introduction you will probably agree that our organization is well placed to take up this challenge. It fits well with our mission, experience and activities. However, supporting scholars at risk who are not yet in the Netherlands and trying to arrange temporary positions at universities is certainly new for us. It raises many questions and we can see some potential difficulties. Luckily we have the experiences of SAR and CARA in the UK to learn from.**
- 10. These experiences are invaluable in order to convince universities to participate. Being able to mention the success of SAR, the names of universities involved in the SAR and SAR/CARA-networks and in particular the examples of scholars will convince any university board of the value of this initiative. However, that does not necessarily mean they will sign up and more importantly that they will actively participate. For that it is first of all important to find the right people within the universities. Ideally, we need to involve and bring together people working at various levels and places within these huge institutions: the policy advisors of the university board seem to be the best contact for discussing and preparing a proposal that**

the university board can not refuse, administrators dealing with foreign students/staff are often useful contacts as well as individual academics. In addition, some faculties for example those concerned with human rights are more likely to be interested, so we also contact these directly. This aspect of the project takes a lot of time and is still an ongoing activity.

- 11. When the right contacts are made, we need to try and answer any questions and take away any concerns they might have. One of the main concerns is money, especially in a climate of ongoing cut backs. Who is going to pay for the temporary positions (these could cost between 40,000 to 80,000 Euro per year)? To alleviate this concern it is important to stress that hosting is not the only activity and emphasise the overall goal of promoting academic freedom and the benefits of being part of the UAF/SAR Network. And we feel UAF can be instrumental in helping universities to find the (matching) funding. We think there are various fundraising possibilities: from national foundations, lottery money, Government money to EU funding.**
- 12. Other concerns regarding hosting candidates are for example the selection and matching of candidates with the university (through the SAR database, but possibly also an additional channel through UAF), how the support for visiting scholars will be provided (we are thinking of a personal contact at both the university and at the UAF), arranging housing for the candidate (many universities have possibilities for this, although the lack of housing in big cities can be a problem in Holland) and what happens when someone's visa runs out and the candidate can not go back because of safety reasons.**
- 13. The latter is of course a very important concern. Although it is ultimately the scholars' responsibility to sort out what to do when a hosting-contract runs out, we believe UAF and the university also have responsibility to help this person secure his/her future. In the Netherlands, threatened scholars will probably be able to get a visa through the Governments' highly skilled migration scheme. This process can be quite straightforward for**

researchers when the university guarantees a working-contract. However finding another position after the hosting-contract is necessary to be able to extend the visa. UAF job support can be instrumental in supporting the scholar to find work in the Netherlands. The EC proposal for a European Blue Card that is under discussion might also make things easier in the future to move to a new job in another European country. An asylum application could also be an option when going back is perceived too dangerous. In that case legal advice is necessary.

14. Because of the above potential difficulties, we are investigating the option of using the route of resettlement. Holland has a yearly quota of 500 refugees among which also 'scholars at risk'. UAF is already involved in supporting many of these people with studying in the Netherlands. There have been initial positive talks with the Government to increase the quota (lets say with 10 or 20 a year) specifically for scholars at risk and also UNHCR has expressed its willingness to help with identifying these people. This route has the big advantage of having a secure residence permit, also after the hosting-contract has finished.

15. Finally, what has been achieved so far. The University of Amsterdam, Groningen University and Nijmegen University already decided to become a member of SAR before UAF was involved. They use different models if you like. In Groningen, the initiative is driven by a committee within the University Council, consisting of three staff members and three students, in Amsterdam the initiative is incorporated into the human resources department of the university, while in Nijmegen the initiative was faculty led. In Groningen, strong points are that the initiative is more broadly supported and that students are involved, while in Amsterdam so far it is more a one woman affaire (but a very committed one!). In Amsterdam, however, the initiative is more part of the human resources policies and money has been allocated to both hosting a scholar + it has become part of someone's regular job to make it happen. In Nijmegen, the Migration Law faculty apparently had a bad experience with trying to host a scholar who dropped out last minute, while they made many efforts to raise money and prepare

his/her visit. Please ask Antoon de Beats from Groningen and Karin Vlietstra from Amsterdam more details about their universities initiatives

16. Furthermore, contacts have been made with other universities such as the Free University in Amsterdam, Universities in Utrecht, Leiden, Tilburg, Wageningen, Rotterdam, Maastricht and the Institute for Social Studies and the bodies that represent universities (VSNU) and higher professional colleges (HBO Council). Conversations are taking place at various levels and stages, but the overall the indications are that universities will join. A joined meeting with university representatives is planned in October, while we hope to launch the initiative officially in December with a conference where we expect universities to confirm their participation. Than the real work starts.

Thank you for listening!