Human Rights Day - All Party Roundtable Discussion
It is an honour to be with you this morning on behalf of Scholars at Risk Canada and to share a proposal to create a national program to support scholars at risk.

Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international network of institutions and individuals whose mission is to protect scholars and promote academic freedom. The erosion of the rule of law and democratic institutions, tightening restrictions on free speech, repression of dissent and opposition place ever-larger numbers of scholars at risk of loss of employment, imprisonment, torture, and sometimes death. Such threats undermine entire higher education systems by impairing the quality of teaching, research and discourse in campus.

Since 2015, Scholars at Risk has documented attacks on higher education communities through their Academic Freedom Monitoring Program with the help of teams in universities like Ghent (Belgium), NYU (USA), uOttawa and soon McGill, and publishes the Free to Think Reports. In the last edition which covers between September 2018 and August 2019, SAR documented 324 attacks in 56 countries including Turkey, India, Venezuela, Ecuador, Thailand, China (See report Obstacles to Excellence: Academic Freedom & China’s Quest for World Class Universities), Hungary and Brazil, to name only a few. The attacks on higher education communities share a common motivation: to control or silence these institutions and personnel. This silence dampens the international nature of science and other scholarly work by effectively limiting the participation in global debate of a significant number of colleagues in different fields.

This is a global loss, this is a loss for Canada.

Canada joined the Scholars at Risk movement in 2012 and today counts 23 university and college members, in addition to the Canadian Association of University Teachers. Canadian members have offered 44 year-long placements benefitting 25 scholars. However only 13 institutions have been able to offer placements, compared to 96 universities and many more colleges, institutes and polytechnics across the country. More institutions remain to join the movement to respond to the (unfortunate) growing demand for placements.

The creation of a national program, SARCAN, would enable Canadian institutions to receive threatened researchers thanks to 20 dedicated fellowships per year, co-funded by the host institutions, and raise awareness of their plight by engaging students and faculty in advocacy activities. (See details in proposal attached)
In a recent report about immigrant integration in the Canadian labor market issued by World Educations Services ("Who is Succeeding in the Canadian Labour Market: Predictors of Career Success for Skilled Immigrants"), the research suggests that those with the highest levels of education, the most international work experience, and international experience in education fared the least well in securing employment opportunities in Canada. A national program could support this population by focusing on mentoring and skills training to close this gap.

This program aligns with the Voices at Risk initiative which seeks to support Human Rights Defenders given that some of them are indeed scholars who have placed themselves at the heart of conflicts or dangerous situations in the context of their academic work. Canada can also choose to deliberately assist female and LGBTQ scholars, consistent with its feminist principles.

By creating a national program, Canada would join like-minded countries with active national sections such as:

1. Netherlands and Belgium where the Foundation for Higher Education Refugees (UAF) linked arms with SAR in 2009 and offers 30 fellowships per year to their 20 Higher Education Institution members.

2. Germany created the Philipp Schwartz Initiative (2016) managed by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation with funding from the Federal Foreign Office and private contributions. They offer 50 fellowships per year for 2 years.

3. France created the program PAUSE (2017) managed by the College de France and funded by the Ministry of Education. They offer 100 fellowships per year for 2 years.


In light of growing insecurity and attacks in the higher education sector, UNESCO issued a revised Recommendations on Science and Scientific Researchers in 2017, replacing the 1974 Recommendation on the status of scientific researchers. The Recommendation stresses the significant value of science as a common good, a critical long-term investment for every country and a key component in national policy-making, international cooperation and development. It also emphasizes the role of Member States in creating supportive, stimulating environment for science and research, and affirms the value of scientific researchers and their work for society.
We know that when scholars are threatened, the principles of the United Nations are under attack.... They are often the first to set off alarm bells and provide early warnings of impending crises, and they are key actors in the development of potential solutions in all areas of life. Canadian universities, colleges, institutes and polytechnics want to help. So we ask the government to partner with us to respond to scholars in situations of crisis and help us ensure that their intellectual contributions can benefit the Canadian academic and scientific research community and society as a whole.

Thank you.

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