
Ideas are not Crimes

Scholars at Risk — Universities Ireland

29 November 2016

I would like to thank you greatly, President, for being present at this significant gathering. By your presence, you do much to strengthen the collaboration between all of the universities on the island to which we owe today's event, but above all to sustain those who depend on this programme, and those who are committed to ensuring its continued existence. Let me especially thank for your remarks, in which you so rightly insist on the close relationship between risk and responsibility. The particular duty that we owe to ideas is our sustained commitment to the intellectual risk from which they proceed, and it is this sometimes heavy responsibility that academic freedom must uphold. Would that such an acknowledgment of the freedom of the conscientious scholar were always and everywhere protection enough. We know all too well that it is not so in many parts of the world, and it is for this reason that we are called upon to assume a special responsibility for those who find themselves facing undue risk for availing of 'the freedom to think, question and share ideas', to quote from the mission statement of Scholars at Risk.

Today's event has been organised jointly by Universities Ireland, which is the Irish Section of Scholars at Risk International, the Scholars at Risk Committee at Trinity College Dublin, and Scholars at Risk International. Ireland and the UK are two of the forty countries where Scholars at Risk is active; this is a global network is made up of 450 universities, including all ten on the island of Ireland, and events like this are important means of demonstrating our commitment, individual and collective, not only to upholding academic freedom in principle, but also to intervening when it is under threat.

Since its establishment in 2009, Scholars at Risk Ireland has engaged in each of the three pillars of the network's activities — protection, prevention and promotion. All three pillars have a renewed urgency today, as the exchanges that we are about to hear will remind us. Member universities have offered temporary academic refuge to many scholars and clearly must be ready to continue to do so. Our network has also hosted events like today's, where we have the opportunity to learn more about threats to individual scholars and to academic freedom, and to reaffirm our commitment to the mission of protection and prevention. The Irish section has also collaborated with other Scholars at Risk networks in Europe, with a view to extending the organization's international network, and has brought the expertise of members of staff in Irish institutions to bear on the Scholars at Risk monitoring project: these colleagues have advised Scholars at Risk on strategies for monitoring specific regions and connected Scholars at Risk staff with academic colleagues in the Middle East and Africa who have now joined a new global network of monitors. The monitoring system helps

to identify trends, develop informed and dedicated monitoring practices, and build increasingly effective responses to attacks on higher education communities.

Speakers' events have recently taken place in the University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast, Maynooth University, UCD and here in Trinity, all led by the Ireland Section, with support from the Higher Education Authority and from the ERASMUS+ National Agency, among other organizations.

Let me close by thanking all of you for being here in such numbers. If you would like to become involved in any way in the activities of Scholars at Risk, please do make contact with Universities Ireland. There are many ways in which Irish scholars can actively contribute to the support and defence of scholars at risk, and to the practical defence of academic freedom. We need the commitment of individuals who are willing to do this work in their own universities. I would ask you to go back to your university and talk to your colleagues and friends who share your concerns about human rights and academic freedom. Let us know you want to help. We can put you in touch with others who are already involved or who have expressed an interest in working for Scholars at Risk. If you need assistance in facilitating a working group in your institution, that assistance will be provided. The Coordinating Committee will very readily bring together representatives from each institution with administrative support from the Centre for Cross Border Studies.

I would like also to express my gratitude on behalf of Universities Ireland to today's speakers; I am very glad that they have the opportunity to intervene today. Our thanks go also to all those who have helped to organize this event — Ruth Taillon, Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, who provide secretariat services for Universities Ireland; Provost Prendergast, Dr Roja Fazaeli, Dr Jude Lal Fernando and Senator Ivana Bacik, and all those in Trinity who have made this event possible (the event has in addition been supported through the Equality Fund in TCD); and to Sinéad O'Gorman, European Director at Scholars at Risk, for being present. The Coordinating Committee has the full support of the Council of Universities Ireland and we look forward to engaging with you with renewed vigour and urgency in your future activities.

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