

**Title: Robert Quinn on Scholars at Risk**  
**Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy**  
**Episode: 32**

### Transcript

**This is a professional transcript but it may contain errors. Please verify its accuracy by listening to the episode.**

**Chris Martin:** This is Half hour of Heterodoxy. My guest today is Robert Quinn. Rob is the executive director of Scholars at Risk Network, which helps protect and relocate members of higher education communities if their freedom and security are threatened in their home countries. Since the founding of Scholars at Risk in 2000, SAR has assisted over 1000 scholars through temporary research and teaching visits.

**Chris Martin:** Hi Rob.

**Robert Quinn:** Hi Chris. How are you?

**Chris Martin:** I'm doing well. How are you doing?

**Robert Quinn:** Great. Really excited to have a chance to chat with you and the Heterodox audience.

**Chris Martin:** Well, we're glad to have you here. So you are Executive Director of Scholars at Risk and you've been doing that for quite a few years now. Is that right?

**Robert Quinn:** I have, yeah. We were in our 18<sup>th</sup> going into our 19<sup>th</sup> year and I've been there since the beginning.

**Chris Martin:** Excellent. And your core activity is protection and advocacy work of academics abroad. Can you talk a bit about that?

**Robert Quinn:** Scholars at Risk or our full name is Scholars at Risk Network. We're a network of universities, colleges, research centers and higher ed associations around the world who come together for the purpose of protecting persecuted intellectuals, primarily facing physical threats or coercive threats and our core activity is to try to arrange temporary positions of sanctuary for them, so that they can continue doing their work and so we don't lose these important voices and their ideas.

**Chris Martin:** What countries are you primarily working in right now?

**Robert Quinn:** Well, over our history, we've seen over 4000 requests for help. So that's 4000 members of the academic community who self-identify as suffering one of these types of risks and they come from over 100 or maybe even at this point, over 110 countries. So on one level,

it's truly a global problem. There is a sort of chronic problem of power clashing with those who are generating ideas and questions.

But at any given time, the acute comes out. There are crises in any given place and at the moment, our crises places are clearly sort of Turkey, Venezuela, Syria and a number of other countries.

**Chris Martin:** OK. And you're helping about 300 academics a year. Is that right?

**Robert Quinn:** Yeah. I mean we have over 700 on our list seeking help at the moment. So there's a clear mark right there that we really need anybody who's listening, connected to a higher education institution, primarily in the US right now but really anywhere, that we need you to join. Get involved. So you can go to our website and see if your institution is already a member. If they are, you can help us try to find a good fit for your campus, a scholar who you might be able to host. If they're not, we really need you to get involved. But yeah, so 700 currently seeking help, new applications still coming in and yes, at the moment, the network is able to help 300 to 350 scholars a year including over 100 placements each year.

**Chris Martin:** That's quite impressive, that number. Are there few universities in America that are taking most of them or is it spread out?

**Robert Quinn:** No, it's very spread out and I agree with you. It's a good number. But obviously compared to the need, it's an insufficient number. But I think on the plus side – and it's really one of the things I say the magic of this project is we don't have a roster of jobs to give out. It only works because there are people at institutions who are willing to receive our emails, look at the case list and say, "Hey, maybe we can help that person. Maybe our campus can benefit from having that person."

So, to me, it's not just so much the number. But it's the spirit and the willingness that that number represents, that really makes it really powerful.

Some universities host every year. Some might be able to host more than one at a time. But by and large, more it's one at a time. Maybe they will have one for a year or two and then that person will leave and then there will be a small gap and then they will host somebody else. That's absolutely fine. We understand that it's going to be different at every different kind of institution.

**Chris Martin:** OK. And I would estimate you're getting a lot of cases from Turkey right now. Can you talk a bit about the situation there?

**Robert Quinn:** So the situation in Turkey for the country itself and then especially for higher education really is quite dire. You're absolutely right. It's probably in terms of the sheer volume the single largest source since I've been doing this now in almost two decades.

It began two or two and a half years ago when a group of scholars of about a thousand signed a public petition urging the government to reassess its policies in the southeast of the country with regard to the Kurdish region.

They were immediately branded as traitors, as terrorists and a purge and persecution of the over 1000, growing to almost 2000 signatories, began. So that was bad enough and then with the attempted coup in July of that year, it expanded to a really countrywide purge of judges and lawyers and certainly the higher education sector.

So now we have over 7000 scholars who have been put under investigation, arrested, lost their positions. Most of them who are facing prosecution have had their passports confiscated and beyond that, their family members have had their passports confiscated.

So they are prisoners in their own countries, not allowed to work in their disciplines and is having devastating effect on their lives and on higher education and what makes it doubly sad is for the two decades before that, Turkey was on the cutting-edge, the leading way of promoting international higher education.

Turkey was a place where we went to host workshops about academic freedom, so we could bring people from all around the region to talk about it there. Unfortunately now, it's one of the biggest source countries.

**Chris Martin:** And in addition to that work abroad with scholars from places like Turkey, you also have been involved with debates in America about freedom of speech and how we should go beyond talking about freedom and also talk about responsibility and values. Can you elaborate on that?

**Robert Quinn:** Yeah. So we have three areas to our work and what we've already been talking about, our core work is what we call our protection work. That's individual case work and that includes the relocation work. It also just helps people where they are, maybe giving family support or legal support to people who are imprisoned and so forth.

But a different track of our work is what we call research and learning or our values promotion work, which is how do we get the broader public and leaders to understand what academic freedom is and why it matters.

So while we don't put most of our energy into domestic US campus incidents, we have been observing what has been going on over the last five or ten years in the US and we really think our international perspective using the experience we have of the 4000 cases that we've seen has something to offer there.

So we've been developing curricula, workshops. We have a MOOC on academic freedom. It's called *Dangerous Questions: Why Academic Freedom Matters* and we're really –

**Chris Martin:** Who's hosting that?

**Robert Quinn:** It's hosted on the Future Learn platform. So we ran it as a test in June. We had over 1000 participants from over – I think it was 90 countries. The comments were really amazing because there's a real tendency – and I think this is one of the big problems in getting people to understand academic freedom and why it matters is the real tendency to see this through a hyper local lens. That this is just about our domestic politics.

Where our work is, is no. If you go to the layer underneath that, this is about what are the rules for sharing and testing ideas in society. How do we have a space where we can agree that you don't win by having the most force? That you don't win by being able to shout down or intimidate or imprison the people who have different ideas.

So the MOOC was really interesting to see people from different religious backgrounds, national backgrounds, educational institutions, countries, wrestle with case examples and to see how they related that to incidents from their own countries.

So I was one of them and then a Turkish scholar who is part of our network was the other lead instructor, Olga Hünler. She's fantastic. She's based in Germany. The MOOC was anchored in Norway. So it was truly a global effort in putting it together as part of an EU-funded project called "Academic Refuge". But we will be running it again on October and we're really eager, especially to see more US campuses get involved.

We're playing with organizing special cohorts. So if there is a campus where there was an incident and people feel like the discourse on their campus got totally polarized and they don't know how to connect again, they don't know how to have a conversation without it turning negative, we would love to see them get in touch. Maybe we could organize a cohort where they can have people go the MOOC together and share their comments in this sort of space.

We think the structure of the content in the MOOC is really the key. I mean we're not really looking at a right/wrong for any given incident. The issue is how do we analyze these incidents and do we share the common goal of are we trying to get to the place we're actually talking to each other apples to apples and actually listening to what people are trying to say rather than particular buzzwords that make it hard to get the meaning.

**Chris Martin:** Now in the US, one problem we have is there are a few people on the speaking circuit who are just out to provoke. They're mainly trolls and from a First Amendment point of view, they do have the right to speak. But many academics don't see any value in having them come to their university. What's your position on how to deal with people like that?

**Robert Quinn:** So there are two different dimensions to what you just asked that I think are really important. So number one is you used the word "right to speak" and in the US cases in particular, we have a wonderfully rich tradition of the First Amendment right of free speech, right? We also have a parallel and related really rich tradition, evolves through the AAUP of academic freedom and what it is.

But I think we're in a little bit of a trap because of those two traditions. We tend to use the right discourse as a trump card and as a way of shutting down the analysis of an incident. So while I

personally – and scholars recognize and would stand with professors that they have a very strong academic freedom right to say and do things that might be controversial or upset people. That's not the end of the conversation and in our MOOC and in our workshops, we pointed that there are other values of higher education space including equitable access and social responsibility and accountability to society. How do we balance the academic freedom dimension with those in responsible ways?

So we can get to what is our ultimate goal. Pursuit of truth, better understanding and actual meaningful dialogues. So in the US incidents, that's why I do think our MOOC and our workshop curriculum could be helpful. We see that a little bit as missing.

Then for the other side of your point is when you have someone who is known – going to be a controversial speaker, how do we campuses deal with that? We talk about that a little bit in the MOOC and it's really – I think the emphasis has to be on good process and ideally an institution would have a very proactive, pro-values culture that they've created. That takes time, right?

So the third content unit in our values workshops, in our MOOC and in our publications is, “How do you proactively develop an understanding of what your institution's values are? Then what processes do you put in place to decide when and how to use this limited space and time that you have on campus?”

So if we wanted to get into it, I would have to know. Was it the university president or the board of trustees invited someone? Was it a student group that invited someone? Some of the incidents on the US campuses recently was actually neither. It was the individual rented a space and wanted to speak on the campus and so forth.

So I think it's important that we dig into those. But at the end of the day, I think it's how universities communicate, how they assess and make decisions and analyze these situations that matter most to their communities.

**Chris Martin:** You're touching on topics in ethics and political philosophy here. When you taught the MOOC, did you draw readings from classical political philosophy or ethics?

**Robert Quinn:** You know, I probably can't claim that. In a specific way, no. I'm sure that we're all influenced by the philosophy and ethics that we come across in our lives and I think when one sits in the chair like I do, which is our program is specifically set up in a place that prioritizes the individual who has been targeted, you can't help but have a moral ethics dimension to how you go about your work, right?

**Chris Martin:** Right.

**Robert Quinn:** But I think also deeply underneath this is what is one's both practical but also I suppose philosophical view of what is the university, what is higher education, what is its purpose. I think it's fair to say that our program fully adopts a view that higher education is not just for elites. It's not just for reinforcing an elite. There has been a democratization of access to higher education and that's a core value.

Once you're in that space, then we need to make sure that the – for lack of a better term, the rules of intellectual combat are fair and reflective of that diversity and getting the best knowledge out of that pool that we can.

**Chris Martin:** When you talk to academics around the world, do you feel like they approximately converge on one definition of what the university is for, that helps you coordinate all of this work?

**Robert Quinn:** You know, it's really interesting. The short answer is yes. So it took me – I'm not an academic by training. I'm a lawyer by training, human rights law by choice. So I came into this saying, "How do I as a defender defend academic freedom, defend this space and these individuals in this space?"

My next question was, "Why hasn't there been more effective defense?" Right? I mean universities have been around for hundreds, if not a couple of thousands of years, depending on your origin story, right? And yet we constantly have pressures and attacks on either individuals or on entire departments or on entire systems. I think that the answer to that really is because there's this tension over what is the university is supposed to do, right?

Our program comes very firmly down on the fact that it's about getting as many individuals as possible educated. As many individuals possible engaged in exercising their own right to contribute to whatever the meaningful issues of their day are, however they want.

So I think that essence is the core of the project. When we go around the world – and we did. We spent about 10 years developing the precursor projects to our workshop curriculum and to the MOOC curriculum and so forth.

It started with a series of workshops. We would go – we went to Amman and we brought people from 20 neighboring countries in the Arab world. We went to Ethiopia and we brought people from 20 different countries around Northern Africa. We went to South Africa and brought people from Southern Africa and we did them in Eastern Europe and so forth.

It always started out the same. The first day, people always said, "You don't understand. It's different in my country." Always. Everybody said it, right? And the first few times we did the workshops, it took us a while to learn.

So then we learned. We said the first day was all testimony. Everybody would get 15 minutes to explain the threats to academic freedom in their country. By the end of the day, it was impossible to say it's different in your country. The manifestations were different but the fundamental dynamics were the same.

Just to make the point super clear, we would always bring somebody from the other side of the world. So when we did the workshop in Amman, we brought somebody from Bangladesh and the methods that the government in Bangladesh were using were exactly the same as the methods – as the governments in the Gulf States were using.

So the “It’s different in my country” evaporated and people could see that all around the world, there are higher education communities and within those communities, there are already people who hold these values, that want academic freedom, that want the autonomy to pursue truth without being told you can’t publish that because it embarrasses so and so and so forth and so on.

So our project has no conversion dimension to it at all. Our philosophy is that these – the people who share these values already exist. How do we link them up? How do we support them? How do we advertise what they’re trying to do, give them a voice?

So in that sense, yes. I do think there is within the higher education sector a very, very firm rooting that academic freedom and the ability to pursue knowledge where it goes is at its core.

Now I would say just – and I will pause right after this – but among states, that’s not at all accepted, right? We have a wide range of state authority and non-state authority that would very, very, very much like to constrain the vision of the university, almost always for purposes of retaining the power structure that they benefit from.

**Chris Martin:** It sounds like you’re saying there’s the democratic and even egalitarian ethos underneath this where along the lines of what Amartya Sen says, university professors absorb the idea that democracy is not just about providing votes and measuring the prosperity of a nation. It’s not just about measuring per capita GDP but trying to measure whether governments are providing education and providing opportunities for education to even those without resources. Is that an underlying ethos there as well among these professors?

**Robert Quinn:** Well, I can say for myself – you know, I come from the human rights lens. So if you anchor yourself in the international human rights movement and the treaties that have been adopted by most countries on earth, then there’s no question that the right to education is one of the core principles. It’s there. We would argue that academic freedom is also anchored there, although not the explicit term.

So that’s not me projecting that. That’s already there in the framework. So any objection to that is an objection to the international human rights framework and that’s a separate conversation, right?

So I also – I wouldn’t say democratic per se because that implies that we have a position on particular governance systems and so forth and so on. I think what we would say and I think accurate within the UN system is democratically legitimate.

So there can be any range of different structures of governance. But there is a test as to whether it has any democratically legitimate anchoring to it. I think that that word “legitimate” is really the essence of why scholars and students and university communities get attacked because when they are willing to stand at the intersection of truth and power and are willing to ask the questions, that question power, they’re really eroding the legitimacy of states that aren’t based on truth or other structures that aren’t based on truth.

So I think that's the essence of it. But again, I got to bring it back to the practical. I don't get there from a philosophical point of view. I get there from looking at 4000 scholars who have come to us and seeing the patterns of what has happened to them and seeing the similarities in what triggered the persecution, the methods that have been used against them and the consequences for persisting.

**Chris Martin:** Now, this is a difficult question. But are you hopeful? Are you an optimist or are you a pessimist at this point in history?

**Robert Quinn:** You know, I think – well, the short answer is I'm extremely optimistic. You know, notwithstanding that, I'm not naïve, right? So I think if you take the long lens of history, we have never lived a time where more people have access to higher education, more people are getting their capacity to be critical thinkers, that we have tools that allow almost any individual to communicate with almost any individual. They're not fully distributed but we're getting there.

So the structural capacity of an ill-meaning elite to silence dissent and prevent the spread of knowledge, that's historically up against the wall, right? Now of course there's always pushback and we're beginning to see very frightening versions of technological distortions of knowledge and I think we need to be on guard for that, which is precisely why the higher education sector to me is so important because the issues are so complicated and the expertise required to be able to assess these dynamics and these risks. We must have free universities where people can develop that expertise and then share it, you know.

I'm also optimistic, Chris. Again, I said I'm not an academic by training. When we started this project, I was brought out to the University of Chicago. We were there for three years. We're now at New York University and very grateful to have such a wonderful home here. But when I first went out to University of Chicago, there was a pretty typical sort of senior graduate student faculty member workshop and I just sat on the side of the room and I had never been in one of those before.

It became so amazingly abstract within a few seconds and then it kept going for an hour. But over the course of the hour – and my beginning was, “What a waste of time! Let's get down to action,” right?

But by the end of the hours, I began to realize that there are two sides to the coin. On the one side, academics is an extremely selfish exercise. I want to spend a lot of time working on what I want to work on because I think it's interesting.

But the other side of that coin is an incredibly generous, “I'm going to share my findings with the world.” I'm not going to get paid for it and somebody else will build on my findings and come up with their great, amazing idea. So I think that essence of collective that's in the academic pursuit, I think that should make everybody optimistic, as long as we keep that current order there.

**Chris Martin:** I appreciate having you on the show. Before we wrap up, once again, a way to get involved with Scholars at Risk is to go to your website and look at how your university can be involved with this project. Is that correct?

**Robert Quinn:** Yeah. Just Google “Scholars at Risk” or “Scholars at Risk NYU”. You will find us. Send me an email. Send our staff an email. But we really – our goal is to link up everybody who cares about these values and then see what we can do together to both fly the flag and to help as many individuals as possible.

**Chris Martin:** Well, thanks for being on the show.

**Robert Quinn:** Terrific. Thank you, Chris.

**Chris Martin:** You can find out more about Scholars at Risk at [www.scholarsatrisk.com](http://www.scholarsatrisk.com), and on Twitter at @ScholarsAtRisk You can also find many other interviews with Rob on the Youtube channel for the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs at [youtube.com/carnegiecouncil](http://youtube.com/carnegiecouncil)

My upcoming guests on Half Hour of Heterodoxy include the authors of two books coming out in September: The Coddling of the American Mind by Jon Haidt and Greg Lukianoff which comes out on September 4, and How Fascism Works by Jason Stanley which comes out on September 11,. I’ll also have an interview with David Askenazi from the Knight Foundation and Jeff Jones of Gallup about their research on students’ attitudes towards First Amendment freedoms.

If you enjoy this podcast, please leave us a review on iTunes. It helps other people find out about the show. And if you’re interested in similar podcasts, you may enjoy Clear and Present Danger: A History of Free speech hosted by Jacob McHangama, and TWO Psychologists four beers, hosted by Yoel Inbar and Michael Inzlicht.

As always this podcast is produced by Heterodoxy Academy. You find us on Facebook and Twitter, and on the web at [heterodoxacademy.org](http://heterodoxacademy.org). Thanks for listening.

Transcription by Prexie Magallanes as [Trans-Expert](#) at Fiverr.com