

# On Small and Closed Academic Environments

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**Gregorić, Pavel**

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### Foreword by Scholars at Risk

On the occasion of Professor John Akker's retirement as Executive Secretary of the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA) and Executive Director of the Network for Education and Academic Rights (NEAR), we take the opportunity to thank John for his lifelong dedication to advancing issues of higher education, refugees and human rights in the UK and around the world. At Scholars at Risk we are proud to have partnered with John for many years in our organizations' combined efforts to protect scholars, prevent attacks on higher education communities and promote respect for education and academic rights. We are particularly grateful to John for his vision in working with SAR in establishing the CARA-SAR UK Universities Network, SAR's first partner network which has not only increased activity within UK institutions but has since been replicated in the Netherlands, Norway, Ireland, Spain, Israel and beyond. We are equally grateful to John for his leadership of NEAR and close collaboration with SAR on international academic freedom workshops and the production of this bulletin, which aims to promote greater discussion and understanding of higher education values. We know that John will be missed by all who have had the pleasure of working with him over the years, and we wish him the very best in this new chapter of his life.

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### A Tribute to John Akker

By Anne Lonsdale

Chair, Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA), United Kingdom

John Akker who retired at the end of April as Executive Secretary of CARA (The Council for Assisting Refugee Academics) had served the organization for the last 13 years since 1999. Indeed, CARA was very much his own creation, as the name only came into being in 1998. The institution is much older, however, having been established in 1933 by Lord (then Sir) William Beveridge, Lord Rutherford, A V Hill and others, in response to the closure of German

Canadian higher education institutions have long been active in this important work, raising awareness about issues of academic freedom, offering temporary academic opportunities to at-risk scholars and participating in advocacy on behalf of scholars and academic communities. Massey College at the University of Toronto was a founding member of Scholars at Risk. Other Canadian members now also include Centennial College, Concordia University, McGill University, The University of Western Ontario, University of Winnipeg, and York University. This past year, scholars from Iran, China, Zimbabwe and Rwanda found temporary academic refuge at Canadian higher education institutions, and faculty and staff at universities and colleges across Canada contributed to advocacy efforts on behalf of scholars in prison in Syria, Sudan and Iran.

The formation of the Canada Section of Scholars at Risk will enable these existing activities to have greater impact, will allow for Section members to organize joint activities and pool resources, and will help identify national concerns and priorities in terms of activities. SAR national sections are a means of engaging national institutions in the wider effort, and of enhancing organization and coordination of local activities in support of academic freedom, university autonomy and related values. The Canada Section will join existing sections in the Netherlands, Ireland, Norway, the United Kingdom and elsewhere, and intends to build upon the experience of these other sections in their efforts to defend the human rights of scholars. The Section will partner with Scholars at Risk to identify opportunities for joint activities, to share advice and to work together to identify and address Section-wide priorities. Most importantly, the existence of the Section demonstrates Canadian higher education institutions' unequivocal commitment to the principle that scholars should be free to work without fear or intimidation.

The June launch in Toronto will bring together higher education and human rights leaders to build solidarity in support of these values. Representatives of all Canadian higher education institutions and others interested in the topic are invited to attend. Attendees will have the opportunity to contribute to discussions about the activities of the Canada Section and to hear directly from scholars assisted by the network, from Canadian universities and colleges active in this work already, and from Scholars at Risk staff. Following his keynote address, Dr. Axworthy will formally launch the new Canada Section.

On behalf of the organizers, I hope you will join us in Toronto to celebrate this event and to learn more about Scholars at Risk and how your institution might get involved.

For further information, please visit: [www.scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/The-Network/Canada-Section.php](http://www.scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/The-Network/Canada-Section.php). If your institution is not yet a member of Scholars at Risk, please contact [scholarsatrisk@nyu.edu](mailto:scholarsatrisk@nyu.edu) to enquire about joining. To learn more about a Canadian institution's experience with Scholars at Risk, please contact me at [mslynk@uwo.ca](mailto:mslynk@uwo.ca).

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## **On Small and Closed Academic Environments**

**By Pavel Gregoric**

University of Zagreb, Croatia

There are various criteria for classifying academic environments, but I would like to focus on two: size and openness. Small academic environments can be described as those in which one, after a decade in that environment, is likely to know most of the people working in one's area and related fields of research. Closed academic environments are those which do not foster, or which even positively discourage, cooperation with other academic environments, especially more progressive and successful ones.

What is the inherent problem of small academic environments? Like in every academic community, it is the members of that community - through various boards and committees - that decide how the resources of the community will be allocated. The problem with small academic communities is that peer review in such communities cannot function. Even if

research project proposals or journal manuscripts are made anonymous, the referees will be able to infer who the authors are, given their previous knowledge of who does what, where and how in that community. On the other hand, the referees are as easy to guess on the same basis, or indeed their names are public. Consequently, academics who make decisions more or less directly know the academics who will be affected by these decisions, and those who are affected more or less directly know who made the decisions. In such a situation it is extremely difficult to allocate resources on the basis of academic merit. Fairness in this situation tends to be understood as equal distribution of resources, such as to minimize the possibility of individual resentment and possible retribution. However, equal distribution of resources just is not good for science.

What is the inherent problem of closed academic environments? Apart from their inability to keep pace with global trends in teaching and research, closed academic environments tend to rely on their own resources in decision-making processes. This makes closed academic environments highly susceptible to inbreeding, cronyism and other forms of corruption. In such circumstances the decision-making process is blind, or even openly inimical, to academic achievements outside the closed academic environment, which inevitably leads to parochialization of research.

Now the two criteria I have chosen are not necessarily correlated: there are small but open academic environments, like in Denmark or the Netherlands, where the perils of smallness are positively mitigated by the advantages of openness. Or you can have a large and closed academic community, like in Italy or Spain, where the advantages of largeness are to some extent mitigated by the perils of closedness; of course, some institutions and research teams in these countries, especially in biomedicine and natural sciences, pose counter-examples to my claim, but that does not suffice to disprove it.

However, there are academic environments which are both small and closed, in which these two features - smallness and closedness - reinforce one another. The small size helps keep a community closed, and the closedness prevents it from growing larger. In other words, the small size of a closed academic community protects its parochialism and susceptibility to all forms of corruption. It is the small size of an academic community that makes the corrupt setup easily manageable.

I am afraid that Croatia, where I have been working since obtaining a PhD at Oxford a decade ago, is an example of such a small and closed academic environment. This is evident from the poor performance of Croatian institutions in international rankings and low quality of research measured by the average number of citations or impact factor of the journals in which Croatian academics tend to publish, but also in high tolerance of corruption. The scope of the latter was seen in 2008, when 95 faculty members, students and staff of the University of Zagreb were detained by the police under charges of corruption. Of 43 persons processed to date, 39 were convicted, among them 18 faculty members, including a professor at the Faculty of Economics who chaired the Committee for the Suppression of Conflicts of Interest, appointed by the Parliament.

I see only one comprehensive way out of this situation: universities and research institutes ought to adopt and implement effective strategies of internationalization, which would include opening our academic market to foreigners, introducing international standards of academic performance, and involving unbiased foreign experts in decision-making processes. I hope that Croatia's joining the EU in 2013 will be instrumental to that effort, and I am pleased that the University of Zagreb is currently drafting an institutional policy paper called "Strategy of Internationalization" which will, I hope, address and resolve many of these important issues.