**Portfolio Review 1:**

**Analyzing the Core Concept of the 2014 Scholarship Programs Strategy**

*“Offering what we’ve called ‘lifeline’ awards to students and scholars in closed societies is the most important work we do in pursuit of the OSF goal to promote open society. Extending assistance directly to individuals in these circumstances, who may ultimately serve to lead their country or community towards a better future, is a high-risk endeavor with a long-term horizon.”*

The topic under discussion for the first Scholarship Program Portfolio Review is the work we do in pursuit of the core concept described above. Our primary objectives in our core concept programming are as follows:

1. To increase professional capacities in the fields of human rights, education, health, policy and development studies in countries where there are growing restrictions on civil society (Civil Society Leadership Awards);

2. To increase capacities in higher education and support academic freedom in politically constrained environments (Civil Society Scholar Awards); and

3. To contribute to establishing OSF engagement in countries where political and civil society constraints mean that OSF cannot easily operate through grants to organizations or legal and advocacy work.

When OSF cannot openly operate within a country, Scholarship Programs employ alternative administrative models to get awards publicized and available to targeted constituencies. We remove our logo and name from award announcements, we rely on partner organizations to facilitate advertising, we create ‘dummy’ e-mail accounts for applicant communications, we manage selection processes that recognize our priorities, and we calibrate pre-academic programming to the widely differing capacities of those who ultimately emerge from these contexts. The administrative models Scholarships use can run counter to the goal of creating communities of open society leaders, however, by distancing OSF from current students and alumni, working through partners with their own agendas, and providing support to individuals who may or may not return home. These counter currents motivate our interest in a deeper exploration of this part of our 2014 strategy.

**I. Purpose and Outline of the Narrative**

The first part of the text below describes the trajectory of our work in Uzbekistan and Burma. These two countries illuminate our history, and are also instructive as we consider our future. In particular we can see how fluid the notion of ‘closed’ is, which variables have led us towards one model of engagement versus another, and the assumptions we have formed over two decades of work in these contexts.

We then take stock of where we are today, noting the substantive adjustments we made last fall as we designed awards specifically for a new list of closed countries, and restructured our budget accordingly. We are currently in the midst of seeing how the new program design is playing out, as we go through a foreshortened recruitment and selection schedule with 26 host universities.

Not surprisingly, current observations are already leading us to consider what we will do differently when we launch the competition for the 2015/2016 academic year. One fundamental problem stands out: what is the added value of a ‘closed’ vs ‘high need’ dichotomy in our work? Indeed, we see at least three related fundamental questions for deeper discussion:

1. How can we build communities of open society leaders with grants to individuals for whom OSF affiliation can be problematic?

2. What kind of partnerships work best in helping us to retain the integrity of our procedures (recruitment beyond elites, transparent and equitable selection) with the least risk to the individuals we seek to assist?

3. How do our country classifications mesh with our partners and colleagues who work in these countries differently; is there better language for describing why OSF Scholarship work in particular uses a geographic bifurcation?

**II. Case studies**

Uzbekistan and Burma represent two evolutionary strands of our work that not only illuminate our history, but are also instructive as we consider our future.

**A. Case Study Uzbekistan: From Relatively Open to Increasingly Closed**

Uzbekistan has always stood out in scholarship competitions due to its large volume of applications and top-notch finalists. Scholarship programs generated 4394 applications and 375 grants from 2000 to 2013. Compared to Turkmenistan and other “closed” countries on our list, Uzbekistan was relatively open to us in the beginning of our activities, as the National Foundation operated openly from 1996 to 2004. In those years we had fairly good access for recruitment and program implementation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

When the Foundation closed in June 2004, we had to shift to partner relationships entirely. Our main partners over the years have been the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and British and French Embassies. Foreign governmental bodies proved resilient to local pressures; they also helped students send applications and documents through their channels without checks, assisted in setting up selection committees with foreign professors, and procured visas for the grantees for their study destinations. In a country where private surveillance is so well orchestrated, no institutional arrangement outside the protection of an Embassy is safe. Even the DAAD office lost its NGO status in 2011 for refusing to allow state audits, and had to move their programs to the German Embassy.

Our colleagues from the Education Center “Bilim- Central Asia” in neighboring Kazakhstan became more instrumental after the closure of the National Foundation. Through their center in Shymkent (on the Kazakh-Uzbek border), they spread scholarship information inside Uzbekistan, meeting small groups of potential applicants in informal environments such as city parks or cafes, since official, large group meetings are prohibited. Unfortunately, even these actions have recently become more risky, as we see intensified police and security control in the country.

It can be said with assurance that Uzbek students are among the best achievers in our programs. A strong sense of commitment and academic ambition, most likely due to the limited opportunities they see at home, make Uzbek candidates highly proactive in their efforts to pursue higher education. That said, the state ideology and the prescriptive ways of achieving the “prosperity of the state” through market economy (the mantra of the present government), generates strong interest in fields that serve geopolitical interests, such as business, economics, technology, security, sustainable development and languages. The best students naturally choose degrees which in their understanding will lead to a guaranteed career. Had we removed Economic Theory, Economics, International Finance, and Global Economic Relations from the list on offer for the French and German scholarship schemes, we would have lost a significant number of excellent scholars. It is hard for young people to form an interest in human rights or sociology, for example, when those subjects are not taught locally, and real-life examples of civic engagement are weak and rare.

In this regard our summer schools and mid-year conferences play an enormous role. Many times at the interview stage or at the beginning of the summer school we observe that Uzbeks are more dogmatic and less able to accept a plurality of opinions in a group. It is consequently inspiring to observe how they change and open up in the course of studying within an academic environment supportive of open debate. They develop critical thinking skills and a taste for careers related to social justice and equitable development of their home country (please see Addendum B on alumni).

The story of Anita Trymaylova is a case in point. An Essex Human Rights alumna of 2002, Anita researched the Andijan massacre of May 2005, which was perpetrated by the Ministry of Interior and National Security Services. She had to flee the country for Switzerland, where she now works at the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Office in Geneva.

The overall mood of the alumni back in Uzbekistan varies. Our Kazakh colleague Leila Yedygenova, (director of “Bilim-Central Asia”), visited Tashkent last December, and she observed that two types of alumni: those who would like to be more actively engaged with alumni networks and work with OSF, and those who are more pessimistic. The concern for safety looms large: several people indicated that they did not want their names to be mentioned in relation to OSF. A few removed themselves from the Civil Society Leadership Awards competition this year when they learned of our funding.

In spite of all the difficulties and challenges we face working in Uzbekistan, the OSF scholarships continue to offer a great deal of added value as they provide support to civil society, unlike other international donors, corporations and governments who avoid sensitive areas in order to benefit from the extractive industries of Uzbekistan. We wonder, however, if we should allow displaced citizens of Uzbekistan to apply for our programs, because our outreach is limited by severe border controls and an increasingly adverse local environment. It remains critical to maintain good relations with our partners who have representation inside the country or near its borders (such as “Bilim” Center), but alumni work will continue to be a challenge in the near future.

B. **Case Study of Burma: Refugees, Embedded Partners, and an Inside Approach to a Closed Country**

Scholarships has provided approximately 1,200 scholarships to individuals from Burma since the early 1990s. For much of our Burma work, supplemental scholarship support was available to any individual from Burma attending any accredited university globally at the BA, MA, and PhD levels. Our support was originally conceived as a “life line” to students, democracy advocates, and ethnic minorities fleeing the country as a result of civil war and the junta-led crackdown in the late 80s and early 90s. Being unable to operate inside the country until the late 2000s meant that the vast majority of our scholarships went to refugees living in Thailand, India, and North America/Europe. Where the only access we have in closed countries (at least in the beginning) is through diaspora populations, we can draw useful lessons from our experience in Burma.

A factor we originally underestimated is that both the context of the particular sending region in Burma and the degree of hardship faced in the hosting country significantly influenced the program effectiveness and outcomes. In India, for example, most exiles come from the Chin community, which faced acute hardships in Burma, and had (understandably) little desire to return home. Refugees in India also faced particularly adverse living conditions and our awards were decidedly more humanitarian in nature than enabling serious academic advancement. Though life was not easy on the Thai side of the border, refugees benefited from more advanced support services provided to border communities. The particular circumstances of the Karen, Shan, and Kachin, as well as Burman diaspora on the Thai side, also made it a more activist oriented community.

Undifferentiated supplemental support in India and Thailand therefore had different outcomes, with many on the India side resettling elsewhere, and many on the Thai side returning home. If our goal is assisting future leaders of reform at home, and not simply humanitarian relief, then a key lesson in working with diaspora populations is to try to understand their probable trajectories. When the educational conditions at home are at least marginally adequate, and the overall home community is relatively stable, it seems that a wider range of support can be very productive.

Our local contact points in India and Thailand were also very different. In India, we were plagued by fraud and low level support services. In Thailand, however, we had a highly motivated and programmatically effective partner, Thabyay Education Network. Thabyay was however deeply involved with social movement politics, which proved to be both an advantage and a challenge. They were (and remain) very passionate about providing in-depth support services before, during, and after the scholarship. Physically close to the refugee camps, they had networks that channeled many excellent applicants to the program.

Thabyay was also adroit at knowing the political boundaries of possibility and then pushing them: they were the main driver behind expanding our work inside Burma in 2008. But challenges arose in maintaining an independent selection process. Being so close to the fire, they struggled with selection committees making decisions, aggressively intervening in determining which candidates were the “right” and “wrong” choices. An activist founded and led organization, Thabyay also grew faster in programs than they did in administrative, fiduciary and management capacity. This relationship was further complicated by OSF’s multi-layered funding and various mutual dependencies.

In 2008, well before other private donors made such a move, we launched a program that was open exclusively to applicants from inside Burma. We created an independent program front, the Asia Pacific Scholarship Consortium (APSC), with no public link to OSF. APSC offered fully funded MA support to early career professionals in OSF related sectors. On the ground, the program was administered by Thabyay, who provided further cover as the public organizational affiliate.

The APSC front allowed plausible deniability for both applicants and officials. By not touting an OSF affiliation, and focusing on politically safe fields such as education, policy, and development, everyone was content to allow the program to operate. Perhaps because of the overall caution, we were also able to support numerous individuals to study more controversial fields like human rights, politics, and journalism.

In order for finalists to have fully informed consent, we did share the OSF affiliation before presenting them with grant letters. Interestingly, we found that mentioning OSF was not enough to trigger an understanding of possible risks, so we explained that we were not only a blacklisted organization, but that affiliation with us could put them at risk. None of the students declined the award, and none faced persecution, although by this point the political dynamics inside the country were already shifting.

The APSC model emboldened us to expand into Laos and Cambodia in 2009. Though the program as such did not survive the 2013 scholarships transition, this model continues to inform how we approach work inside closed countries where we have access, but cannot have open affiliation.

**III. Working Assumptions for Effective Closed Country Programming**

The case studies above, along with wide-ranging experiences elsewhere over two decades, have led us to several assumptions about what constitutes effective program design for closed countries.  These assumptions fall into three areas of program design: the first refers to individuals themselves, the second concerns potential institutional partners (at both the recruitment and host university level), and the third involves options for grantee “integration” into the OSF network.

**A. Challenges associated with grants to individuals in closed societies**

Special support is particularly critical during recruitment and selection. ‘Access’ means the process must be open and free.  Our applications are marked “free of charge” and we normally cover costs such as standardized testing fees, university application fees, and university deposits—all of which are often prohibitively expensive for most applicants.  Even the mechanisms for paying these fees are often unavailable:  they may be barred from making international financial transactions (legally or by simply lacking a credit card).  Applying online to universities as a first step in apply to our scholarship (currently the norm following the foreshortened timeline) entails not only significant fees now borne by the individual applicant, but securing an array of documents (transcripts, recommendations) in electronic format for uploading.  Accomplishing this in a low bandwidth country, with concerns about privacy, can be impossible.

Individuals from closed countries need recourse to “plausible deniability”.  By removing our logo and name from award announcements, relying on partner organizations to facilitate advertising, and at times creating ‘dummy’ e-mail accounts to provide information, we create a low-risk application process.  Although this runs counter to our impulse toward transparency and disclosure, the tension is unavoidable and we continue exploring ways to address it, such as deciding at what stage it is most ethical and responsible to inform individuals of OSF sponsorship.

Since individuals from closed countries tend to be less competitive in a traditional academic sense, we should provide programming to help bridge academic gaps.  Our summer schools are primarily designed to assist students improve their academic writing and research skills in preparation for a western-style academic environment.  The summer school experience is capped by pre-departure orientation sessions organized by destination countries.  Grantees, for some of whom the summer school is the first experience abroad, are coached on cultural adjustment, the academic system in their host countries, and opportunities for support throughout their program.  Clustering grantees at host universities is also helpful as they benefit from peer support. Clusters also tend to improve the host faculty grasp of the various home country contexts.

**B. Challenges Associated with Partnerships**

Scholarships staff must coordinate closely with partners to mitigate OSF identity “dilution” as well as ensure that our agenda is advanced. Forging strong and effective partnerships is frequently an exercise in patience and diplomacy. OSF is a complex organization, and it takes time to understand how scholarships fit into the myriad initiatives of the network. Working through partnerships naturally hinders some of our operational freedom. Examples include government sensitivities to funding controversial research, differing views on the nature of leadership, and simply agreeing on what constitutes a good candidate, when the usual signifiers of academic achievement may not apply. Fluctuations in personnel obviously slow the learning curve, as can radical shifts in direction from either side.

The time and labor required to forge ties with overseas partners is mirrored in the construction and maintenance of partnerships with host universities. Starting in the recruitment phase, OSF staff reassure host universities that OSF respects the integrity of their admissions processes and requirements, while also making the case for applicants who do not fit mainstream profiles. Universities tend to prioritize the most academically talented; OSF tends to prioritize civic activism and evidence of creative initiative.

**C. Challenges Connecting to the Open Society Network**

If we consider our grantees and alumni as potential players in a larger world of open society work, we need to showcase the efforts of the network in such a way that these individuals are inspired to participate. We try to do this a variety of ways, most recently (and seemingly very effectively) with a conference on “The Futures of Democracy”, which showcased both OSF and the CEU School of Public Policy.

Internships provide a useful bridge from the classroom to the workplace for grantees whose previous professional experiences may be limited. This is particularly relevant for individuals from closed societies, where professional experience can be more easily leveraged than foreign academic credentials. Addendum B has various kinds of alumni data which an internal working group is analyzing in order to improve our connectivity options.

Yet all these program elements skirt a fundamental conundrum: how can we promote OSF connections to individuals from closed countries when that connection may well bar them from returning home to serve the purpose for which we originally supported them?

**IV. 2014 Observations**

With a significant budget reduction as well as a new geographic focus, in fall 2013 we started to close almost 20 programs, and simultaneously launch two new ones (on a dramatically truncated timeline). The decidedly late launch forced us to forego most of our customary recruitment and selection practices; their absence however has created an instructive comparison point (a kind of procedural ‘control group’ moment). This still-evolving comparison foregrounds our views on what is working, and what isn’t, for assisting individuals in closed societies.

In “normal” years, administering a full-scale MA award program requires planning and effort spanning sequential fiscal years and academic calendars. Successful recruitment requires time for advertising widely among populations not easily reached, and helping interested applicants understand the requirements of the award and gather official documents (transcripts, recommendations). Our multi-stage selection process has to dovetail with host university admissions and standardized test registration deadlines. Selection decisions must be made and grant letters generated in time to secure potentially two visas (one for the summer school location and another for the host university country), each of which can take weeks.

Normally therefore, an award for a 2014/15 degree program would be launched in early fall 2013. Selection would be well underway by year end, and final decisions made in the second quarter of 2014. Given the abbreviated schedule we faced for 2014, we realized that our best bet was to select grantees from existing applicant pools at various universities. Even then we realized that with significantly fewer awards, we would have to limit the applicant pool even further, since we work with dozens of universities around the world and we would not have the resources to support MA awards at all of them. We therefore sent a ‘Call for Expressions of Interest’ to a subset of partner universities, asking how many scholars the university could accept on our cost-share terms within their admissions schedule.

Forty universities responded, and in early December the Scholarships Advisory Board reviewed the responses and selected 26 institutions to host clusters of Civil Society Leadership Award grantees. Among those are 5 universities respectively in the UK, the US, and Germany, 3 in France, 3 OSF-supported institutions (CEU, Riga Graduate School of Law, and Warsaw School of Social Research), University of Hong Kong, American University of Cairo, Maastricht University in the Netherlands, Sabanci University in Turkey, and TERI University in India.

A key and fundamental difference from our usual practice, however, was that we were not as active in recruitment: our agreements with the universities were being negotiated and our announcement text was being drafted as university admission deadlines were flying by. We abandoned most efforts at independent recruitment, relying instead on the selected hosts and partners to attract applicants. The results are instructive albeit somewhat discouraging: when universities or other partners are the sole recruiters, we simply don’t see the range of applicant profiles we are accustomed to. Even though hosts and partners are aware that OSF prioritizes candidates with a proven commitment to improving civil society, we are seeing a significant homogenization of applications in 2014, skewing toward professional fields such as management, finance, and technology.

From an advertising and recruitment standpoint, therefore, the closed country designation has made the creation of an effective, comprehensive and transparent advertising strategy a challenge. This challenge is compounded when we add our second new program into the mix, the Civil Society Scholar Awards. All countries within our core concept and fealty to field strategies are eligible for these non-degree academic study grants. Using the example of the CSLA awards, we drafted ‘clean’ versions of the CSSA announcement for those countries on our ‘closed’ country list. We are aware though that since these awards are also advertised (with clear OSF affiliation) on international listservs and on our website, that we are probably sending a mixed message to our target constituencies.

As well, some of our current ‘closed’ countries weren’t ‘closed’ for us as late as last year: Syria, Azerbaijan, and Egypt all fall into this category. This patchwork of advertising strategies, necessitated by the closed and high need dichotomy pitched in our 2014 strategy, raises ethical questions for staff. Concealing our identity seems at times to be futile, paranoid and opaque. In an age where one can type the grant name into Google and have the direct link to the OSF website appear, how valid is our assumption that plausible deniability matters?

Relying on partner universities to administer the application process can also present a financial barrier to potential applicants. Through our normal process an applicant incurs no expense in the application process, since OSF covers application fees and the costs of standardized testing. Without our involvement these costs (a typical application fee to a US university is $75; TOEFL test registration is $150) are passed to the individual, who is usually required to have a credit card for payment online.

Another problem arises in selection. Scholarship staff frequently advocate for the admission of individuals who present a compelling personal trajectory but may not meet all admission requirements. When we are involved with selection from the start, our advocacy for such individuals can overcome certain bureaucratic hurdles such as minimum test scores or grade point averages. Relying on universities to make the “first cut” removes this possibility, as we only see the applicants deemed to have met university admissions criteria. Additionally, we are hitting data protection issues as we perforce adjust to accommodate a streamlined review process. Universities are uncomfortable uploading applications to Box.com for our review; yet we are uncomfortable offering the awards to applicants we have not reviewed. What we thought would be a technological innovation, therefore, is proving to be a data protection drag on our work.

**V. Going Forward**

In sum, two main themes emerge from the preceding discussion. First, in most ‘closed countries’ we have to work at some remove from the realities on the ground, sometimes by targeting refugee communities, frequently by working with neutral program partners, and almost always by creating unattributed programs. Though this distancing allows us to offer the ‘lifelines’ we value, we are challenged to overcome the loss of closer connection and open affiliation with grantees.

Second, the truncated timeline and the necessity to work through universities in this year’s competition has limited our applicant pool both in quantity and in the range of profiles that emerge when we lead recruitment more directly. Access is limited when applicants must deal with complicated university admission procedures and fees; universities lack the outreach that OSF enjoys.

Finally, the designation of ‘closed’ and ‘high need’ countries is problematic. What is troubling is that the distinction made by OSF about ‘closed’ and ‘high need’, not the context on the ground, determines which award type we can offer where. Context on the ground should be the driver of the tools we use, but the distinction made from afar is what drives our current approach.

1. In the period between 2000-2004, when the NF was operational, we received 3326 applications from Uzbekistan, which is more than during the 8 year period after the closure, when we received only 1068 applications. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)