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HR EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH

SCHOLARS AT RISK
NETWORK
protection advocacy learning

25 YEARS

The University of Florence and the Scholars at Risk Network

Reaffirming our commitment to academic freedom, inclusion and diversity

As the Scholars at Risk (SAR) Network celebrates its 25th anniversary during the 2025–2026 academic year, the University of Florence proudly joins institutions around the world in marking this important milestone. This anniversary is not only a celebration of impact achieved, but also a renewed commitment to the fundamental values that sustain higher education globally.

Truth Matters

The theme of this anniversary, "*Truth Matters*," is both timely and timeless. It affirms the essential role of truth in the pursuit of knowledge, the protection of academic freedom, and the advancement of democratic and equitable societies.

Founded in 2000, SAR has grown into a global network of more than 600 institutions across over 40 countries. United by a shared mission, member universities have provided protection and support to thousands of scholars whose work—and often their lives—have been threatened because of their ideas, research, or teaching.

Yet SAR's mission extends beyond protection. It defends the very principles that make universities vital to society: freedom of inquiry, critical thinking, open dialogue, and a steadfast commitment to evidence and truth—even when they are inconvenient or contested.

At a time when disinformation, censorship, and attacks on academic voices are increasing worldwide, truth is not merely an abstract value—it is an act of courage. Scholars continue to face imprisonment, exile, and professional persecution simply for conducting research, teaching, or expressing critical perspectives. Standing up for truth therefore means standing in solidarity with those who risk everything to pursue and defend it.

The University of Florence and SAR

The University of Florence's membership in the SAR Network reflects our deep alignment with these principles and our commitment to academic freedom and international solidarity. In 2026, the University is hosting two at-risk scholars, providing them with a safe and supportive academic environment where they can continue their work and engage with our research community. Through this initiative, we actively contribute to global efforts to protect scholars and safeguard intellectual freedom.

Hosting at-risk scholars also means strengthening the University's role as a place of exchange among different experiences, cultures, and perspectives. The presence of researchers coming from contexts marked by conflict, persecution, or restrictions on fundamental freedoms

represents an important opportunity for both scientific and personal growth across the entire academic community. Through engagement with research developed in complex environments, students, faculty, and staff can develop a deeper awareness of the global challenges affecting the contemporary world and of the value of academic freedom as an essential prerequisite for the production and dissemination of knowledge. From this perspective, hosting at-risk scholars contributes to promoting a culture of peace, respect for human rights, and international cooperation, in line with the University's commitment to social responsibility and openness to the global dimension of research.

We share SAR's commitment to documenting challenges in higher education and advocating for stronger protections for universities, scholars, and students worldwide, because we believe that truth is not a static possession, but an ongoing pursuit—one that requires openness, dialogue, and institutional courage.

This commitment is fully embedded in the institutional mission of the University of Florence. The University Statute recognises freedom of research, teaching and learning, cultural pluralism, and the University's contribution to the development of democratic society as fundamental principles guiding its action. In line with these principles, the University Strategic Plan identifies among its priorities the strengthening of internationalisation, the enhancement of people, the promotion of inclusion, and the consolidation of the University's social responsibility.

Hosting at-risk scholars therefore means translating these principles into concrete actions and helping safeguard the conditions that make the free production, circulation, and sharing of knowledge possible.

Inclusion and Support: Our broader commitment

Our commitment to academic freedom is closely linked with our dedication to inclusion and diversity. At the University of Florence, fostering an environment where all students and scholars can thrive - freely and without fear - is a core institutional mission.

Through the UNIFI Include service, we promote equity, equal opportunities, and well-being across our community. Services are tailored to support members of our academic community in situations of disadvantage or with specific needs, including:

- dedicated services for students with disabilities and specific learning disorders, offering personalized support tools and accessible resources;
- psychological counselling services;
- inclusive spaces designed to enhance participation in academic life.

Inclusion is not merely a support measure addressed to individuals or groups experiencing disadvantage; it is an essential component of the quality of the university experience and of research itself.

Numerous studies and international reports highlight how diversity of experiences, skills, and perspectives fosters innovation, creativity, and the ability to address complex challenges. For this reason, the University of Florence considers the enhancement of diversity a strategic element for the growth of the academic community and for pursuing its educational, scientific, and social mission.

The University's approach to inclusion is therefore based on the belief that accessibility, equity, and the enhancement of diversity are indispensable conditions for full participation in university life. In line with the objectives of the Strategic Plan and the inclusion and diversity policies adopted by the University of Florence, these principles are not treated as a separate field of

intervention but as a cross-cutting dimension affecting teaching, research, knowledge transfer, and services to the university community. The goal is to ensure that every person can access the University's educational and scientific opportunities and contribute fully to academic life.

The University has also taken concrete steps to support students seeking asylum or holding international protection status. Since January 2020, we have adhered to the *Manifesto of the Inclusive University* promoted by the UNHCR, aimed at expanding access to higher education and fostering social integration and active participation for refugee students. This commitment includes support with enrolment procedures, academic orientation, recognition of qualifications, and access to university services.

Adherence to the Manifesto of the Inclusive University and participation in initiatives aimed at students and researchers with migrant backgrounds or under international protection are part of a broader strategy to promote equity and access to knowledge. The University recognises that skills, experiences, and educational paths developed in different contexts represent a resource for the academic community and society as a whole. Facilitating access to higher education and research means contributing to the creation of more inclusive and resilient societies, strengthening intercultural dialogue, democratic participation, and social cohesion.

Through these actions, the University of Florence promotes inclusion pathways that enable students and researchers from vulnerable backgrounds to realise their potential and actively contribute to academic life. Supporting people affected by forced migration is also an investment in knowledge production, innovation, and the development of local and global communities by fostering the circulation of skills and diverse perspectives.

Finally, our University encourages student-led cultural and social initiatives by allocating funding and resources to projects conceived and implemented by student groups. These initiatives enrich university's life and strengthen our sense of belonging, solidarity, and shared responsibility.

Universities, democratic citizenship and social responsibility

The University of Florence recognises that its institutional mission extends beyond the transmission of knowledge and the production of scientific research. As a public institution, the University contributes to the cultural, social, and democratic development of society by educating individuals capable of exercising the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in an informed and responsible way.

From this perspective, the promotion of democratic citizenship is achieved through fostering critical thinking, open exchange of ideas, and the ability to assess information and arguments based on available evidence. These principles align with the values underpinning academic freedom and the work of Scholars at Risk and represent essential conditions for the proper functioning of democratic institutions.

The University's social responsibility is also expressed through its ability to place knowledge, expertise, and research results at the service of society, helping address complex challenges such as social inequalities, migration, environmental sustainability, the protection of human rights, and the strengthening of democratic institutions. In this framework, protecting at-risk scholars and promoting inclusive environments are complementary expressions of the same vision of an open, responsible university oriented toward the common good.

The pursuit of truth is a responsibility that transcends the boundaries of the academic community and connects the University with society as a whole. Through third mission and public engagement activities, the University of Florence promotes dialogue with citizens, institutions,

schools, associations, and local organisations, sharing the knowledge generated through research and contributing to the cultural and civic development of society.

This interaction strengthens civic participation and fosters more informed decision-making processes grounded in evidence, expertise, and diverse perspectives. Defending academic freedom, promoting inclusion, and engaging civil society are therefore not separate goals but interconnected dimensions of a shared institutional mission focused on the production and responsible sharing of knowledge.

Universities as spaces where truth can flourish

A university is not merely a place where information is transmitted. It is a living community where inquiry, debate, evidence-based analysis, and critical reflection are cultivated and protected. These processes empower individuals and societies to make informed decisions and uphold democratic values.

In a global context where freedom of thought and institutional autonomy are under pressure, universities must reaffirm their responsibility to defend the conditions that allow research and learning to flourish without interference or repression.

Truth is the foundation upon which freedom, human dignity, and the progress of democratic societies are built. Its pursuit finds full meaning within open, inclusive, and pluralistic communities in which the exchange of ideas and the free circulation of knowledge can take place without discrimination, pressure, or undue limitations. For this reason, safeguarding academic freedom, promoting inclusion, and embracing social responsibility toward society are closely interconnected dimensions of the university mission.

For the University of Florence, defending truth means promoting the rule of law, respect for fundamental rights, combating all forms of discrimination, democratic participation, and valuing diversity. It means creating learning and research environments in which everyone can contribute to the production and sharing of knowledge under conditions of freedom, equity, and mutual respect. This vision is grounded in the principles set out in the University Statute and the objectives outlined in the Strategic Plan, which recognise openness, inclusion, and social responsibility as defining elements of the University's institutional identity.

From this perspective, the University of Florence's commitment within the Scholars at Risk Network is linked to its inclusion and diversity policies, public engagement activities, and social responsibility initiatives. These are distinct but deeply interconnected areas united by the goal of ensuring that the University continues to be an open space for research, dialogue, and the shared construction of knowledge.

Truth is the foundation upon which freedom, dignity, and the flourishing of individuals and societies rest. Academic freedom ensures that knowledge can develop, ideas can be explored, and inquiry can thrive without constraints. Universities hold a unique place in this landscape, offering spaces in which truth can be pursued openly, critically, and without fear.

As we celebrate 25 years of the Scholars at Risk Network, the University of Florence renews its commitment to these principles—through concrete action, institutional policies, and daily academic life. Let this anniversary serve not only as a commemoration of achievements, but as a call to deepen our efforts: to speak out, to support at-risk scholars, and to ensure that our universities remain places where truth can flourish—freely and without fear.