

TO THE SCUOLA NORMALE COMMUNITY

Dear Colleagues of the Academic, Professional and Technical-Administrative-Librarians Corps,
Dear Normaliste and Normalisti,

Encouraged by some Colleagues, I am putting myself forward for the Directorship of our Scuola Normale. When submitting the candidacy, one is required to present “the programme containing the policy lines to be pursued in governing the Scuola during the term of office”. It seems right to me to illustrate to the entire SNS community one’s ideas and broad guidelines. However, it is essential to remember that Directors do not ‘govern’: the Scuola designed by the Constitution, the laws and its own traditions is a collegial academic community, founded on the free exchange of ideas and the sharing of values and strategies. Those who have the honour and responsibility of being elected to direct it are primarily the custodians and guarantors of the community’s values and aspirations, and their main task is to help put those values into practice.

A programme, therefore, cannot be an illustration of an individual’s plans; rather, in these pages I propose to put forth some ideas about the Scuola and its future as a basis for a discussion to be held together, both in the weeks leading up to the vote (given the timing, it was not possible to do this before today), and, if I am elected, during the term of office.

I owe a great deal to the Scuola Normale. The main reason that, despite many hesitations also due to personal circumstances, has prompted me to submit my candidacy is the desire to work to ensure that new generations of students can take advantage of the extraordinary opportunities offered by the Scuola. Of course, the Normale of the future cannot, and indeed must not, be identical to the Normale of the past: its mission, though, remains more important than ever, and the values that inspire it will surely guide us as we face the uncertainties and the opportunities the future has in store.

My interest in the workings of universities also originated at the Scuola, where I was a student representative on the Consiglio Direttivo, the body that in the past brought together the functions now divided between the Academic Senate and the Board of Directors. Before returning to Pisa three years ago as professor of Latin Literature, I taught in Italy, Great Britain and the United States, in universities with different characteristics –Wisconsin-Madison, Princeton, King’s College London, Roma Sapienza and Manchester– experiences that allowed me to compare systems and ways of working and that I would now like to put at the service of the Scuola; in the last two years, as Vice-Director, I have had the opportunity to meet many of the people who work here and to get to know directly, in part at least, its mechanisms, another very useful experience from which I have learned a great deal.

In the universities where I worked, I have often held positions of responsibility, contributing to academic initiatives that have been consolidated over time. In London, I founded the *MA in Creative and Cultural Industries*, from which in the course of twenty years a large department has developed; in Manchester, *Creative Manchester*, one of the university’s three interdisciplinary research platforms (along with *Sustainable Futures* and *Digital Futures*), a wide-ranging interdisciplinary initiative that brings together scholars from engineering to creative writing, sociology to medicine, music to artificial intelligence, around

the theme of creativity, and which has given a strong impetus to the university's relationship with the city's cultural and artistic institutions; in Rome, I contributed to the creation of the Scuola Superiore di Studi Avanzati Sapienza, of which I was the first director from 2011-2016. I have also held, in Italy and abroad, positions that have been important for a better understanding of the workings of the university and research system: for two terms, from 2008 to 2015, I coordinated the Technical Secretariat for Research Policies of the MIUR (now MUR); I was a member of the National Committee of Research Guarantors (2015-2018), of the Governing Council of the National Commission of UNESCO Italy and of the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education of the European Commission. I have served and continue to serve on advisory or steering bodies in academic and cultural institutions, including the International Ovid Society (I was its president in 2023-24), the Jackman Humanities Institute (University of Toronto), the Lorenzo Valla Foundation, Humanitas University, the American Academy in Rome, the Manchester UNESCO City of Literature Consortium, and the Italian Academy of Advanced Study at Columbia University.

Thinking about the future requires balancing enthusiasm and realism, both of which are indispensable to avoid facile illusions on the one hand or a paralysing excess of caution on the other. Personally, I am convinced that the Normale is in an excellent position to respond to the challenges looming on the horizon: it can rely on a broad and consolidated scientific prestige in the international arena, based on the quality of its research and teaching, to which the administrative and technical structure guarantees high-level support; it attracts very talented students, has relatively ample resources and great freedom of manoeuvre in the choice of disciplines on which to concentrate. It is therefore to be hoped that the conditions for further growth –led by quality, creativity and innovation– will materialise. It is our duty to work together to preserve and strengthen a Scuola, the Normale, that represents an invaluable heritage of all.

I am very grateful for your attention. I trust there will be an opportunity to discuss these issues, and others you may wish to point out to me, in the weeks to come.

Alessandro Schiesaro
Pisa, September 2024

THE SCUOLA NORMALE TOMORROW: FIRST THOUGHTS

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1 IDENTITY AND MISSION OF THE SCUOLA

If the Normale did not exist many of us would like to invent it. Designing it would be complicated, because its defining characteristics are very peculiar, having evolved over time in response to changing needs, aspirations and sensibilities; even analogies with foreign institutions are almost invariably partial and imperfect. The result of this historical stratification, whose most significant stages began with the radical changes that took place from the early 1960s onwards, is an institution that combines the ability to carry out advanced research with a comprehensive teaching project which spans from the beginning of university studies to the awarding of the doctorate. It is a model that works brilliantly, as evidenced, better than by various international rankings, by the national and international success of Normaliste and Normalisti in the academic field and beyond, as well as by the awards and competitive funding for research secured by the academic staff.

The prestige the Scuola enjoys represents a demanding heritage that needs to be protected and enhanced. The Scuola today finds itself operating in a very different landscape from that of even the recent past. I start by mentioning two macroscopic data. The first is the heavy demographic decline that Italy has been experiencing for some time now, which will lead to a contraction in the university population over the next few years (it is unlikely that the drastic drop in births will be sufficiently offset by a further increase in the rate of transition from high school to university, although this is lower in Italy than in other European countries). In 2022, for the first time since the Unification of Italy in 1870, the number of births fell below 400,000 (393,000; there were just over a million in 1964, the last year of the baby-boom). When, in 2041, it will be time for the 2022 cohort to enrol, the starting pool will be almost 30 per cent smaller than in 2016, from which the 2025 freshers come. Against this backdrop, even if the Normale admits only a few dozen students per year, we cannot be certain that the *concorso*, our admission competition, will continue to attract enough applicants to ensure an adequate critical mass.

On the other hand, the number of autonomous *Scuole Superiori a ordinamento speciale* (University-level Schools with special status), is on the rise, growing in less than fifty years from one to eight, five of which were founded after 2005. The Normale, the only Italian institution of this type until 1978, is now part of a large group with uneven characteristics in terms of size and type –only Sant’Anna and the Scuola Superiore Meridionale, for example, host undergraduates in the so-called ‘corso ordinario’; to this number we should add the Scuole internal to their respective universities, i.e. not autonomous –the main ones are at least 10–, which since 2023 have also benefited from dedicated state funding.

A vigorous effort is therefore indispensable to define the **distinctive features** that characterise the Normale and to communicate effectively, in Italy and abroad, the identity of a Scuola that is steadfast in its mission, proud of its history and strategically projected into the future.

Because of its history and the multiplicity of functions it performs, the Normale is particularly affected by a problem common to all autonomous Scuole, which still lack a specific regulatory framework (the very definition of ‘Scuola superiore a ordinamento speciale’ has never been fully articulated in law).

Due to this legislative vacuum, the Normale is governed by laws and provisions –on recruitment, programming, evaluation, organisation of doctorates, to name but a few– that are often totally unsuited to its needs because they were designed primarily for generalist universities. The negative repercussions of this forced homologation are many. I will mention the main ones, starting with the disproportion between the complexity of the bureaucratic procedures required and the size and practices of the Scuola, which is asked to comply with onerous regulatory requirements designed for institutions of a completely different nature and size; an equally negative repercussion concerns the work of the academic staff, which combines teaching (inevitably in forms that cannot be identical to those typical of generalist universities), with the functions of research directors, a combination that is difficult to manage in the absence of explicit regulatory provisions. Lastly, the possibilities for growth that the Normale could express if it were endowed with broader operational margins are being stifled: for an institution that from its very inception has been operating in an international dimension, it is vital to be able to elaborate strategies for the future with the utmost agility in a higher education landscape that is constantly evolving at great speed; even in Europe alone, there exist great opportunities for collaboration and development, provided we are able to seize them in a timely fashion. This is why I consider it so important that the Scuola be given the opportunity to equip itself with an innovative operating model. A model, incidentally, that, being solidly anchored in a tradition of high scientific and educational standards, could also serve as a prototype for testing solutions that could possibly be extended to other realities.

2 A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

La Normale is a community of people: “all the components of the Scuola,” the Statute explains, “contribute to the achievement of the institutional aims within their respective functions and responsibilities”. The life and success of the Scuola is based on shared principles and fundamental values, on a collective commitment to a mission of whose importance we are all convinced. It is worth reflecting on the most important of them.

I would like to start with **inclusivity**, i.e. a spirit of openness, a sense of fairness, an appreciation of differences, a broadening of opportunities. In practice, this means, first of all, putting in place management methods that, while respectful of institutional responsibilities, favour listening and dialogue, consultation and involvement, both formal and informal, of the whole Scuola. The opportunities for dialogue offered by the General Assembly (‘Assemblea generale’) and the University Conference (‘Conferenza di Ateneo’) can be extended, as can the sharing of information and thus the synergy between its various areas and components: the internal functioning of a complex institution and its ability to project itself authoritatively to

the outside world are based on collegiality and the ability to communicate that the cohesion indispensable to. Communication, I would add, is easier when there are **spaces for socialising** that provide opportunities to meet and talk in an informal atmosphere; apart from the canteen, the Scuola does not have these, and I think this is a gap we should fill.

A spirit of inclusion also means awareness of and respect for the **dignity of work**, of all forms of work. The constructive relationship between academics, staff and students, based on dialogue and on devoting specific care to labour relations, is an indispensable condition for the serenity of the workplace and the success of the Scuola. We are fortunate to be able to count –as is often observed even by those who visit the Scuola– on members of staff, including the outsourced ones, who take care of an essential part of the activities very well, who are passionate about their work and characterised by a strong spirit of belonging: it is essential that the Normale guarantee the best possible working conditions for everyone and enhance their professional skills. In some areas, there is a tangible need for staff growth in response to the increasing diversification and complexity of management processes.

The main characteristic of the Scuola is that it is only accessible by competition, and therefore by **merit**. The Normale embodies the full realisation of the principle expressed in Article 34 of the Constitution: “The capable and deserving, even if without means, have the right to reach the highest levels of studies. The Republic renders this right effective by means of scholarships, family allowances and other provisions, which are to be awarded by competitive examination”. Unfortunately, one sometimes has the impression that this fundamental factor is obscured by the perception of the Scuola as an elitist institution, aimed at excluding rather than including. This is a misunderstanding that is at least partly understandable, because within a national system that is underfunded and very unequal, the image of an institution which is accessible to a limited number of academics and students is striking. From here to thinking of the Normale as a ‘luxury’ that the public system cannot afford the step may be short, but it would be a profoundly wrong one.

Clarity is needed, and the Scuola, if for no other reason than its history, has the task of doing so with vigour: the Normale does not offer privileges, but opportunities, first and foremost that of being able to face from the outset, in an environment rich in international contacts, the excitement and challenges of research through an intense relationship with the teaching staff and with equally determined fellow students. These opportunities are open precisely to those who are “capable and deserving”, regardless of economic considerations.

Merit does not mean meritocracy. The valorisation of merit, which registers a state of affairs, was born to counter the privilege of birth and census; meritocracy wrongly upgrades merit to an absolute value and makes it the foundation of a divisive ideology, almost as if it wished to reconstitute an inaccessible and privileged caste like the one that merit was born to supplant. Instead, one must be aware of the relative nature of merit: individual talent is transformed into merit also thanks to favourable social and contextual factors that some people have enjoyed while others have not, and not because of their demerit. The competition for admission to the Scuola, which comes at the end of the school years, takes note of the skills each person has acquired, but cannot retroactively guarantee equality of opportunity, an aspiration that it is up to politics to fulfil in obedience to the constitutional norm. Awareness of the contextual factors, however, entails an assumption of **responsibility** on everybody’s part, both the responsibility of performing the Scuola’s institutional tasks – teaching and research– with the greatest possible commitment, and that of extending its

positive impact, not only as part of its third mission, but in the form of a broader cultural, educational and scientific impact on the rest of the university system and the country.

One of the most tangible manifestations of the Scuola's civic commitment are its **orientation** activities, which must also be expanded and articulated in relation to specific problems such as gender imbalance, geographical origin and socio-economic background (an aspect, the latter, on which a statistical survey should be launched). We are counting on the funding provided by Ministerial Decree 291/2024, for which we have applied (the outcome is expected soon), to make it possible to intensify our efforts in this area, for example through the activation of mentoring programmes to guide in the preparation for the *concorso*. In addition to fulfilling a role of public responsibility on the part of the Scuola, orientation is of crucial importance for securing its future, since in the post-Covid period there has been a substantial drop in the number of applications for the first-year entry.

Those I have briefly recalled are at the same time inspiring principles and objectives to aim for, and thus help to define a plan of action aimed at combining the aspiration to expand the boundaries of knowledge with that of creating a community of work and study increasingly focused on the wellbeing of its members and on the civic responsibility of the institution. I will focus on two priorities that cut across all components of the Scuola: gender relations and the wellbeing of all the people who study and work at the Normale.

Reducing gender imbalance is a key objective. To achieve this, it is essential that, before focussing on individual proposals or initiatives, there should be an awareness that the current situation is not acceptable and that it must be decisively addressed on many fronts: the recruitment of academics, orientation and participation in the admission competition, living arrangements, forms and content of teaching.

Although the Scuola's *Gender Equality Plan (GEP) 2024-26* signals some progress, the picture it paints is still very unbalanced, starting with the make-up of the academic staff. Currently, only 5 out of 33 full professors are women, a percentage –15.1%– which is lower than the Italian average (33.3%) in the 7 subject areas involved, and lower than that recorded in the most unbalanced area at national level (area 2, Physics), where female professors are 15.4%. The imbalance also has repercussions on working practices, because the justified need to ensure an adequate female representation on the governing bodies and on committees places an excessive burden of work on female colleagues; the implications in terms of institutional representation are also negative, as evidenced by the fact that at the moment only one female colleague is eligible for the office of Director, and in two Faculties out of three none can be elected as Dean.

The situation of the student body is also unbalanced. In the Humanities, the first-year admission competitions held in the ten-year period from 2013 to 2023 recorded, with 49.3% of female candidates, an average of 32.7% female winners, with peaks of 46% in 2022 and 43% in 2023. In the Sciences, over the same period, an average of 22.8% candidates produced 9.4% winners.

The gender imbalance is particularly noticeable in relation to the study of STEM subjects at university level. The imbalance has complex reasons but is definitely not due to a lack of interest, given that this year the 100 places in the 'Scienze di domani' ('Women Scientists of Tomorrow') programme for female high school students attracted 1,875 applications. Given the rigid structure of the Italian high school curricula, however, it is crucial to bring forward

this targeted guidance to the moment before students choose which high school to attend, as the 'Ispira' programme does; it is a priority, I think, for the Scuola to ensure continuity and stability for these two initiatives.

Specific orientation actions also appear necessary in the Humanities; although the presence of women is larger, and the figures for 2022 and 2023, as we have seen, show an improvement, it remains significantly lower than the average for generalist universities, and the number of female candidates for the undergraduate competition is lower than would be expected on a statistical basis.

The **wellbeing** of all people in the SNS community is a fundamental goal that we must set ourselves as an institution. A crucial aspect is a **balanced relationship between life, work and study**. Working and studying at the Scuola is an intense and involving experience that stimulates a very special kind of commitment and dedication, but the risk is that it becomes all-consuming, eroding if not erasing the proper boundaries between life, work, study and socialisation. Wellbeing in the place of work is a legitimate and widespread need for all components: for **technical, administrative and library staff** (and is in fact expressly referred to in the new National Labour Contract, CCNL, 2019-2021), for the **academic staff**, and for **students**.

Some aspects affect the whole community. The **simplification** of administrative processes, for example, makes a decisive contribution to the wellbeing both of those who must manage those processes and of those involved as users. In many cases, unfortunately, the Scuola must operate in the presence of external constraints it cannot modify, in others it can act with greater freedom of manoeuvre. As far as the former are concerned, we must strive to obtain, as far as possible, the appropriate regulatory changes; the latter must be tackled by identifying one by one the steps that can be simplified (e.g. by avoiding, wherever possible, the involvement of several bodies, or by delegating individuals) and, above all, by computerising processes. An academic calendar that offers a clear frame of reference for teaching, and a timely planning of foreseeable events and meetings would ensure that all the Scuola's components can organise their time better (for academics it would also help define the moments that can be devoted to research in a continuous and intense manner, given the progressive erosion of the academic year's boundaries).

Throughout the SNS community, there is a widespread concern for **environmental sustainability**, which is reflected in the 'SNSustainable Campus' project. The use of space and energy, mobility policies, the reduction in the use of plastic and paper and their recycling are all aspects of the Scuola's daily life on which we must focus our attention with a view to continual improvement.

A central responsibility of the Scuola is the **welfare of students**, a mission that, in my opinion, is on a par with those relating to teaching, research and dissemination. For some time now, many countries have recorded an increase in cases of psychological distress, including severe ones, affecting the student population. I mention a personal experience that struck me. When I became Head of School at Manchester in 2016, about 2,000 out of 6,000 students in the School were listed in the 'Disability Register', most of them for psychological causes, some mild, many, unfortunately, severe. A few years earlier, when I left London, such a register did not even exist.

Sense of isolation and competition are serious risks, especially in a community such as the Normale where academic pressure is intense; the number of temporary withdrawal requests and of drop-outs signals a worrying degree of unease. It is the duty of the institution to make every effort to reduce the visible causes of stress and to support students who experience difficulties. The Scuola offers useful services in this area, both in the academic and professional sphere (peer tutoring; Career Services; Alumnae/i Network), and in relation to the personal one (psychological support; psychiatric counselling and support; counselling against gender-based violence; Ombudsperson (Consigliera di fiducia)). Some of these, such as peer tutoring, which has recently been reorganised and now also includes initial training for tutors, are not yet used to their full potential. It is necessary to continue to invest in their development –especially around psychological support– and to organise them into a real **Students' Office**, a more visible and accessible 'one-stop shop' that would work as the point of contact for all services dedicated to the wellbeing of students, including Visiting and exchange students.

Prevention is also of the essence. In October, part of the freshers' welcome days will be devoted to psychological wellbeing, with the aid of external experts, to acquaint them from the outset with the available services and to ease the transition to community life, a new experience for those arriving at the Normale that makes university life stimulating while also requiring a sense of responsibility and respect (these meetings will be repeated throughout the year).

The sense of collegiality and the opportunities for collaboration between students, while varying in each Faculty, are not optimal (in Florence there is the added problem of the distance from Pisa), and the full involvement of persons with disabilities is far from being achieved. The positive experiences that already exist in this field, for example group preparation of examinations or seminar papers, can be extended and expanded. Changes to the inevitably busy academic calendar can also help to reduce the excessive concentration of commitments at certain times of the year.

3 STRATEGIES, CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to the reflection on the issues and needs I have outlined, I consider it a priority to elaborate an **academic strategy for the future**. It is not too early, indeed it is almost too late, to imagine the Normale of 2030 or 2035 (and perhaps even that of 2050), because the implementation of strategic choices inevitably takes a long time.

Particularly in this area, as I made clear at the outset, I believe that the director's task is to formulate questions, to suggest a method of work, and to facilitate dialogue; here I would like to outline, as a framework for a reflection on the contents and without any claim to completeness, some of the challenges and opportunities to be borne in mind at a general level.

First, an indispensable premise. It is essential that the Scuola preserve a basic balance between the Faculties, which is one of its defining features (this also applies to Social and Political Sciences, once its starting point is considered). A Scuola Normale too unbalanced in one direction or another would lose that character of intellectual and academic cohesion that is a valuable cultural resource and could indeed be better exploited (I will return to this point shortly). That said, I am convinced that this principle must be interpreted flexibly. Different areas and disciplines, even within the same Faculty, have different ways of doing research and

therefore different needs: in some, teamwork prevails, in others, research is carried out by individuals; some require fieldwork, others, a desk in the library. In the context of a shared overall strategy, each area or discipline must be allowed to design its future in the way that best suits its specificities. If the founding values and objectives are clear, freedom of manoeuvre is an asset, even more so in an institution where size still allows for a global view of its activities. It follows that the best way to develop a strategy is to start from the proposals formulated at Faculty or area level and then to discuss them together and to check their feasibility.

The evolution of universities and research is inherently rapid and often unpredictable – indeed, this is one of the most exciting aspects of doing research. Less exciting is the **unpredictability of the economic and regulatory framework**, with which one must in any case come to terms. The total amount of the recurrent annual grant ('Fondo di finanziamento ordinario' or FFO) to universities, the main transfer of resources from the government, is determined year by year in the state budget just days the start of the new financial year, and each institution is notified of its specific allocation, in a best-case scenario, in July.

On the regulatory level, in addition to the structural problem of the lack of specific regulations for the Scuole, the factor that most adversely affects academic strategy is the uncertainty about the recruitment of academic staff; experience teaches that all it takes is an amendment to the budget law or to an emergency statute to bring about overnight far-reaching changes whose impact is particularly strong in institutions, such as the Normale, of limited size and with peculiar characteristics. Right now, this uncertainty is especially intense as far as pre-tenure-track positions are concerned, for in this area old rules which have been repealed and then revived compete with new ones which exist on paper only, while both are overshadowed by problematic reform proposals. These are matters, on the contrary, where stability over time is indispensable if new generations of scholars are to be given the opportunity to embark in a reasonably predictable career path and institutions are to be allowed to think strategically about their future.

The **size** of the Normale is small in comparison to comparable institutions (almost half of the 67 colleges in Oxford and Cambridge, for example, are larger, and the École Normale Rue d'Ulm alone hosts around 2,300 students in various categories, a number higher than the student population of all the autonomous Scuole in Italy (2,240 in the 2022-23 academic year, of which 740 undergraduates). The advantages are tangible –collegiality, direct contact between academic staff and students, seminar-style teaching–, but it is also worth considering some potentially problematic implications. In research, the critical mass of the groups is a significant factor; a small teaching staff makes it difficult to distribute administrative and managerial responsibilities, a particularly thorny problem when it intersects with that of the scarce presence of women and the need for them to be systematically represented; the Scuola's planning capacity is also constrained, because major initiatives such as the PNRR or EELISA require great collective efforts.

As far as **resources** are concerned, over the last five years, the increase in state transfers, especially that of the FFO, shrewd management, and the substantial PNRR funding, which the Scuola has been able to attract to a truly remarkable extent, have led to a positive economic and financial climate. The short- and medium-term prospects, on the other hand, are very worrying. Already in 2024 there has been a drop in the FFO, and the general state of public

finances does not encourage optimism, witness thereof the constraints just placed on the use of the 2025 and 2026 portions of the extraordinary recruitment plan launched in 2021. Since the FFO must absorb both cost increases due to inflation and salary increases determined nationally, even a stagnating FFO, let alone a reduced one, has negative effects on other parts of the budget. Added to this are the restrictive measures on cash-flow that had been suspended during the pandemic period and have now been reinstated. The post-PNRR scenario is still to be defined, and although it is to be hoped that at least some of the resources deployed under the Plan will stabilise, as recommended by the final report of the working group on 'Italy's Strategy for Fundamental Research' chaired by Luigi Ambrosio in 2022, a decrease looks inevitable.

In addition, a general accounting rule remains in place that determines based on a rather rigid formula the share of the budget that can be used for expenditure on goods and services, i.e. in all activities except salaries and the acquisition or construction of new buildings. In 2023 and 2024, the decoupling of energy expenditure from expenditure on goods and services freed up significant margins of expenditure for academic activities, but it is not clear whether this exception will be still be allowed in the future; if not, the impact on the Scuola would unfortunately be considerable, not least because the rule does not take into account the increase in operating expenses produced by the opening of new spaces, such as the Palazzo della Canonica, which is scheduled to open next year.

Finally, there is a problem that concerns the Normale specifically and to which we must pay great attention. Some of the autonomous Scuole have been insisting for some time on a "rebalancing" of the funding allocated to the sector. Without going, for the moment, into the merits of the request, if the rebalancing were to be carried out using additional funds with respect to the current FFO, the damage to the Scuola would probably be limited, but if the process were to take place without any overall change in the available resources, the Normale would be the first to suffer.

Regardless of the development of the general framework, it is useful to think about how to increase the Scuola's ability to generate or attract **its own resources**, which are indispensable not only to cushion possible FFO reductions but also to finance additional initiatives and services that the FFO does not provide for. These resources can derive primarily from research funding, which, incidentally, increases the staff bonus fund. In order to adequately face the fierce competition, especially for ERC funds (but the same goes for FIS and other Italian programmes), it is a priority to strengthen the offices that support the **preparation and management of research projects**, which have been able to cope very well with the demands of the PNRR but whose workload is likely –indeed desirable– to continue to grow. Added to this is the fact that a high percentage of research projects, including in the humanities and socio-political area, now require the availability of a digital infrastructure and the presence of specialised technicians.

Own resources can also come from **donations**, which the Scuola already attracts thanks to the Associazione Amici della Normale, but which can be increased. Without prejudice to the free nature of the Scuola's institutional activities, advanced training activities can also be considered, also in collaboration with other state administrations, with ad hoc forms of funding.

As far as **space** is concerned, a medium-term project must address the needs that have already been ascertained and enable growth if desired. The inability to provide

accommodation for PhD students is at odds with the residential nature of the Scuola, entails substantial costs for the students, given high market prices (especially in Florence), and limits the potential for recruitment from abroad. It is also necessary to increase the working spaces for PhD students and post-docs as well as for visiting professors, and hopefully those dedicated to social activities and to sport, just as it is necessary carefully to assess the needs of the Florence campus in the light of the growth of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences ten years after its establishment.

4 THE SCIENTIFIC PROFILE AND TRAINING MODEL

At the Normale, scientific profile and educational model are inseparable. The Scuola's leadership position in research has matured over time and must be maintained and increased in a context, as mentioned above, which is very different from the past, and much more competitive in terms of both advanced research and the recruitment of talented students. A **strategy for the future**, whether we envisage growth in absolute terms or not, requires clear-cut choices. It is first of all necessary to ask ourselves what is the optimal size of the Normale as a whole, and what is the ideal balance –not necessarily identical in each of the three Faculties– between the undergraduate course, which is an absolutely central feature of the Scuola, and the PhD programmes, which have grown considerably in recent years (today PhD students are more numerous than undergraduates; this is partly a transitory effect due to the PNRR grants).

The focal point of the discussion is the disciplinary perimeter of each Faculty and of the Scuola as a whole, which concerns each Faculty. Although the Faculty model refers in theory to the structure of generalist universities, the Scuola cannot and must not compete with them in terms of extensive coverage of areas and disciplines. On the other hand, the Scuola, given the peculiar nature of its teaching, is freed from the obligation to cover specific disciplines as required for the accreditation of university degree courses, and therefore enjoys the greatest freedom in the choice of courses to be activated. Moreover, the diversification of activities, not only between undergraduate and PhD courses, but also within the latter, and the possible expansion of the para-curricular sector through short courses and the 'summer schools' envisaged by Ministerial Decree 291, offers the possibility of finding different solutions in the various segments; especially in the postgraduate sector it is possible to envisage innovative courses.

What matters is the Normale's **distinctive profile**, its ability to combine high quality research in already consolidated areas with the ability to intercept innovative research perspectives in a flexible way, to present itself as a laboratory of new ideas and cutting-edge research perspectives –all indispensable factors to ensure its prominence and its ability to attract staff and students nationally and internationally. The number of areas in which to continue –or begin– to invest are and will necessarily remain small: in these areas, however, the Normale must represent an undisputed point of reference in the international arena, a model and a source of inspiration.

The expectation to offer new intellectual stimuli and to expand in a flexible manner the number of disciplines taught could be addressed by a growth in the teaching provided by **visiting professors**. In this case, too, it is a question of assessing the best way to structure the

already considerable volume of these activities, to ensure, for instance, that at least part of it is directly functional to the expansion of the curriculum, and to extend its availability outside the Scuola as far as possible. The experimentation begun this year with the programme for *Distinguished Visiting Professors* is a step in this direction, and in this vein, we can also revive distinguished lecture series such as the “Lezioni Fermiane” and the “Cattedra Galileiana” in the Faculty of Science and the “Comparettiane” in the Humanities, an activity which characterises many institutions similar to the Normale and which have direct positive repercussions beyond the Scuola.

Interdisciplinarity is an area in which the typological difference between the teaching provided in the universities and that of the Scuola can be expanded. The Scuola Normale, as the Statute expressly says, is the ideal place to “explore the interconnections and potential for development between disciplinary areas”. Indeed, there is room, starting from the experience of the Istituto Ciampi, an important resource in this context, to broaden the interaction between disciplines both within and between Faculties, because many of the topics currently at the heart of the scientific enquiry and the public debate require the joint efforts of experts with different skills; the same is true of important areas of research such as Digital Humanities or the expansion of artificial intelligence. Cross-Faculty lecture programmes and coordinated invitations to Visiting Professors can strengthen this dialogue, as can the creation of agile interdisciplinary centres, i.e. ad hoc groupings of professors, along the lines of the ‘Programmes’ widespread in many institutions, which offer the possibility of collaboration without bureaucratic burdens.

Recruitment of **early-career researchers** should be permanently established as the Scuola’s third area of activity, alongside the undergraduates and postgraduate courses. Attracting a reasonably large number of ECRs on a regular basis is essential to make a tangible contribution to the training of new generations of scholars and to ensure the Scuola’s vitality in research and its openness in innovative directions. Whatever the contractual forms established by national legislation (research grants, research contracts or others), the Normale must be at the forefront in offering ECRs working conditions comparable to those of the best European post-docs. We have begun to do this with the De Giorgi Centre’s post-docs and with the allocation to each Faculty, starting in 2022, of several two-year open-topic post-docs –the only ones that guarantee full scientific autonomy– offering a salary significantly higher than the minimum decided by the Ministry in 2011 and never updated since: this is an experience that must be continued and expanded. Some aspects can be further improved, for example the length of the post-doc (abroad it often of three years), so as to offer a sufficiently long period of stability in which to devote oneself intensively to the research project and consolidate one’s scientific profile while waiting for a permanent position; the full integration of these figures in the life of the Scuola, which is very difficult when the assignment is of short duration; the coordination of recruitment and hosting programmes.

Unlike standard university teaching, the Scuola’s traditional **curriculum**, aimed at preparing students who plan to continue their studies at doctoral level, has not undergone any radical change in recent times. The results, as mentioned, show that overall the model works; however, certain aspects deserve attention.

Following the changes in the social and cultural landscape and the growth in size of the Scuola, it is no longer possible to assume that a single educational model is valid for all its

students. As we are reminded by students, especially from the Humanities and the Social and Political Sciences, the Normale trains not only students interested in research but also in other fields of activity. Naturally, the Scuola cannot address directly all the needs that may arise from time to time; however, it is possible to explore training options whereby some students can direct part of their curriculum to areas different from the traditional ones. In this sense, EELISA represents an important if yet underexploited resource, because it makes it possible to draw on a vast catalogue of courses offered by our partner institutions, starting with Sant'Anna.

The integration of these alternative models with **placement** activities, which deserve increased investments, could create a virtuous circle between the Scuola's teaching and job opportunities outside academy, also by making the most of the network of alumnae/i on which the Scuola can rely.

5 THE NORMALE IN ITALY AND THE WORLD

The **Scuola's public mission** is paramount: the Normale must be a leading point of reference on the cultural scene, both for the prestige of its scientific activity and for the initiatives it addresses to a wider public. The Scuola can boast a decades-long tradition in this field, since with the orientation courses and the concert season it has been committed to the third mission before it had a name or became an object of evaluation. The Edizioni della Normale and the Scuola's commitment to open access publications fit in the same direction.

Events designed to reach a broader audience, in Pisa and especially on the web (the YouTube channel and the *Alla Enne* portal are valuable resources), deserve to be consolidated and expanded: the talks series "I Venerdì della Normale", involving prominent personalities, can stimulate debate at the national level; with "La Normale per la Scuola" and its participation in the "Lincei per la Scuola", SNS teaching can reach a broad and diverse audience.

The Scuola's consolidated experience in organising cultural events could pave the way to the creation of a **cultural festival**; to be sure numerous festivals already exist in Italy and abroad, but '**La Normale delle idee**', drawing on the Scuola's expertise and prestige, can turn Piazza dei Cavalieri into a landmark forum for public discussion inspired by the values of science and culture.

Thanks to its international prestige the Scuola can offer its students rich opportunities for contact with foreign institutions, both by attracting to Pisa a constant flow of visitors and by providing numerous exchange scholarships (their number is not yet sufficient, however, to guarantee an experience abroad for all PhD students and a significant number of undergraduate students). The need for further investment in this area must be attended by a reflection on how to increase the recruitment of **students from abroad**, since their size does not currently reflect the scientific importance of the Scuola except in a few areas; this objective also entails strengthening the orientation and welcoming services dedicated to them. A Scuola Normale that is fully integrated in the international circuits must also be attractive as a destination for PhD students, and possibly for undergraduates as well.

The creation or consolidation of **partnerships** with foreign institutions that go beyond a mere exchange agreement could also prove productive. More structured relations could involve not only the exchange of students, but research and teaching as well, allowing the use of online courses, a recurrent relationship with visiting professors, the creation of doctorates or other joint courses. In the first instance, we could assess to which of the current foreign partners we could propose an enhanced relationship, and then examine further options, for example with some institutions that, although not identical to the Normale, are partly similar: in Germany and the Netherlands, many universities have opened Honours Colleges; interesting programmes exist in Toronto, in China, and in other countries. Still on the subject of broad-based relations –this time at the research level– one could consider joining the **Consortium of Humanities Centres and Institutes** (CHCI), a global forum that brings together numerous organisations in the Humanities and Social sciences (the same could of course be done for consortia in the sciences, although some CHCI members have an interdisciplinary imprint that already transcends the distinction); with some of these organisations it would be very interesting to establish an ongoing relationship.