



Disability Awareness Conference

Fostering social change through education

The Disability Awareness Conference entitled “Open Minds . . . Open Doors”, to be held in Florence in February 2026, will highlight the vital role of Education in removing barriers related to disability, and in serving as a lever for social awakening and the protection of human rights.

*"An open mind can hold the whole world because inclusion isn't just about access
— it's about belonging."*

Synopsis

The Problem

- According to the World Health Organization, 15% of the global population lives with a disability.
- The *World Report on Disability* identifies society's negative attitudes as the most persistent barrier: inappropriate behavior, stereotypes, and prejudices — mainly rooted in ignorance — lead to the lack of visibility and the social exclusion of people with disabilities.

The Solution

Inclusion requires that society be aware and prepared to address each person's uniqueness and differences.

- Education is the answer to social indifference — the primary vehicle for developing social consciousness and cultivating future active citizens. Systematic information, awareness, and meaningful interaction form the foundation for an Inclusive Society and safeguard the basic rights of vulnerable social groups.

- School is — or should be — a place of open dialogue, coexistence, cooperation, and acceptance, helping to shape well-rounded personalities. In school, we not only learn to read and write, but also to define ourselves while building relationships with others.

Conference Objectives

- **Highlight** the key role of education in breaking down barriers, fostering connection, and enabling us to live together in harmony.
- **Exchange** perspectives with Italian and international students on the visibility — or lack thereof — of young people with disabilities in their respective countries.
- **Engage** in dialogue with educators, professors, policy makers, local entities & authorities, institutional and independent bodies from Italy and across Europe to better understand the challenges faced by disabled individuals within their educational systems.
- **Propose** the establishment of structured Educational Programs within the school curriculum, based on Empathy and the development of Social and Communication Skills of students and aimed at awakening and developing an inclusive mindset.

Organizing entities

- **ISI FLORENCE (The International Studies Institute, Florence)** - Established in 2001, The International Studies Institute (also known as ISI Florence) is a consortium of state universities from Australia, Japan, and the US. Working also with private colleges and universities, ISI Florence teaches courses in a wide variety of disciplines (architecture, art history, biology, chemistry, history, Italian language, literature, math, photography, physics, sociology, studio arts and many more) to over one thousand students per year, both during regular semesters and in the summer. Located in two prestigious historic buildings (Palazzo Rucellai and Palazzo Bargagli), ISI Florence also offers many opportunities for internships and volunteer activities.

- **SKEP - Association of Social Responsibility for Children and Youth** is a nonprofit organization established in 2008 in Athens, Greece, striving for a barrier-free and rights-based Inclusive Society. SKEP's people have dedicated themselves to fighting social exclusion and the lack of visibility of people with disabilities, envisioning an all-inclusive society where everybody feels accepted and useful. SKEP uses Diversity Awareness Educational Programs to challenge stereotypes and promote positive attitudes toward diversity from early education through broader society. The ultimate goal we are pursuing is harmonious coexistence in a changing world.

- Imagine Heritage Non-Profit / Greece - Imagine Heritage is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving, celebrating, and revitalizing cultural heritage through innovative, community-driven initiatives. We focus on social and citizen practices, recognizing everyday actions and civic engagement as vital forms of intangible heritage. By bridging past and present, we empower communities to engage with their traditions, arts, and civic life in meaningful ways. Our programs foster creativity, education, and sustainable cultural development, ensuring heritage is remembered, lived, and shared as a source of collective identity and citizenship.

Venue and date

- **Conference date:** Friday, February 20, 2026.
 - **Morning session:** *Palazzo Strozzi (Gabinetto Vieusseux, Sala Ferri – ground floor)*, 9:00 AM – 1:15 PM.
 - **Afternoon session:** *Palazzo Strozzi (Gabinetto Vieusseux, Sala Ferri – ground floor)*, 2:45 – 5:30 PM.
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Schedule

9:00 Welcome Remarks:

Dr. Carlotta Ferrari

General Manager, Fondazione Destination Florence – Italy

Dr. Valentina Ippolito

*Florence World Heritage and Relations with UNESCO Office
– Municipality of Florence –Italy*

Professor Stefano U. Baldassarri, Ph.D.

Director, ISI Florence – Italy

9:15 Dr. Athena Kritikou

Founder & President, SKEP – Association of Social Responsibility for Children and Youth - Greece

“When Education Opens Minds, Inclusion Follows”

9:45 Professor Emerita Frosso Motti-Stefanidi Ph.D.

National & Kapodistrian University of Athens - Department of Psychology - Greece

“Building an Inclusive Mindset Through Education”

10:15 Dr. Spyros Kogkas

Co-founder & CEO Imagine Heritage Non-Profit - Greece

“Learning Together: Inclusive Education as the Soul of Europe’s Cultural Democracy”

10:45 – 11:15: Coffee break

11:15 Professor Valia Aranitou Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens –
Scientific Director at Prorata Public Opinion Research - Greece
"Tracing Attitudes, Perceptions and Behavior towards Disability"

11:45 Dr. Zoi Geroulanou

President of the Center "Greek Guide Dogs" - Greece
"Notes on a Guide Dog's Contribution to the Life of a Blind Handler"

12:15 Dr. Dimitra Kontova

SKEP's Inclusion & Accessibility Consultant – Motivational Speaker – Dimitra lives with a
mobility disability - Greece
"Breaking Stereotypes Through Education"

12:45 Dr. Annalisa Baroni - Dr Marilena Pinco - Dr Eleonora Sirsi

Municipality of Florence. Education – Childhood Services - Italy
"All In. From Welcome Day to In-Class Participation: Inclusive Programs in Florence's Nursery
Schools and Preschools"

1:15 – 2:45 PM Lunch break

3:00 Dr. Daria Coste

Dynamo Camp – Italy
"Dynamo Camp – Right to Happiness: Where the True Healing Comes from Laughter and Medi-
cine Is Joy"

3:30 Dr. Ashod Derandonyan

CEO of the European branch of the US based Deaf Leaders of Tomorrow Foundation (DLTF) –
Bulgaria
"Beyond Inclusion: The Power of Deaf-Centric Education in Shaping an Inclusive World"

4:00 Professor Maria Bukhanovskaia

Special Education Teacher, Specialist in AAC & Early intervention, co-founder & CEO of "Patch-
work", Civil Society Organization, Krakow - Poland.
"When Disability meets Refugee Experience: Rethinking Inclusion in Education through an Inter-
sectional Lens"

4:30 Dr. Filippos Pierros

Former Member of the European Parliament – Former EU Deputy Permanent
Representative to the OECD - France
"Education for Inclusive Societies: Lessons from International Organizations"

5:00 Dr. Katie Ciulla

ISI Florence/Tulane University – Italy/US

Dr. Serena Giorgi – Dr. Nina Peci

ISI Florence - Italy
"Florence Through New Eyes: Stories from an Inclusive Center"