France Universités

OPEN LETTER

Paris, November 16, 2026

Mr. President,
Mr. Prime Minister,
Ministers,
Members of Parliament,

We, French rectors, together with our teams, are increasingly the target of insults and threats, and an ever-growing number of death threats. A vice-rector of a French public university was attacked with a knife in his office.

Yet we refuse to give in to fear.

Fear has become one of the main – if not the sole – drivers of our society. Fear of social decline or exclusion, fear of others, fear of change, fear of the future. Fear of debt, of climate change, of technological upheavals, of the conflicts multiplying around the world. These fears, which foreign powers eager to destabilize our society and destroy our values can make the most of, thrive on the challenges we face. These fears are real, and no one can claim that they will disappear as if by magic.

It is time for fear to give way to hope.

Our public debate has seemed trapped for too long in a succession of fruitless confrontations. Hardened divisions and short-term tactics are taking precedence over long-term visions and the common good. Compromise becomes suspect. Every concession, or rather, every hand held out to the other side is presented as a defeat. Every difficulty fuels the narrative of a country teetering on the edge of collapse. After all, how could we not be afraid of the abyss?

Meanwhile, the French are waiting. Waiting for solutions to their daily struggles, of course. But also, and perhaps above all, French people are waiting to hear where we collectively want to go. What kind of France do we want to live in ten or twenty years from now? What role do we want our country to play in Europe and in the world? What kind of society do we want to pass on to our children?

Because politics cannot be reduced to managing emergencies, containing deficits, or avoiding the worst, **governing should also, and above all, be about creating the conditions for improvement.**

In today's Republic you are the holders of the highest offices, and we know that these responsibilities are a heavy burden to bear. However, you also have a specific duty – demonstrating that our democracy is still capable of reaching decisions, forging agreements, and mapping out a future that is both shared and desirable.

We do not expect you to agree on everything. Pluralism, the exchange of ideas and respectful debate are the foundations of our democracy. But we do expect that your disagreements will no longer prevent you from acting on what matters most. We expect you to once again distinguish between what constitutes irreconcilable convictions and what can and must be subject to cooperation. You are expected to rediscover a sense of collective responsibility, beyond partisan interests and electoral tactics.

More than anything, we expect you to finally outline the society we aspire to build.

A society in which success does not depend primarily on where one is born, a society where education, training, and knowledge truly enable each person to find their rightful place. A society that recognizes and values work, protects the most vulnerable, guarantees access to public services, and does not allow social or regional divides to widen inexorably.

A society that does not view ecological, demographic, and digital transitions as mere threats to be overcome, but as major transformations to be anticipated, supported, and guided. Artificial intelligence, for one, will revolutionize the way we work, learn, produce, and live together. We can either passively endure these changes at the risk of further increasing inequalities and dependencies, or choose to turn them into drivers of progress, sovereignty, and empowerment. Achieving this aim will require investments in skills, research, innovation, and support for those whose jobs and lives will be transformed. The same approach should apply to all the major global transformations currently underway.

Finally, a society that regains confidence in its own strengths. Our country has talents, expertise, businesses, public services, researchers, teachers, healthcare workers, nonprofit organizations, and engaged citizens. Our society has a young generation eager to take its place within it. Let us stop viewing France solely through the lens of its vulnerabilities. Let us also recognize its resources and mobilize them.

We are not naive. We know that this ambition will require difficult choices to be made.

Yes, our country must regain financial flexibility. Yes, we will have to make efforts and not shift the burden onto others. Yes, we will have to reconsider some of our habits, transform our institutions, and accept that some objectives simply cannot be funded right away. **But these efforts will only be accepted in the long run if they are fair, understandable, and offer hope**.

Fairness in the distribution of these efforts is all but a secondary requirement. It is the very condition for their acceptability and their democratic legitimacy. Everyone must contribute according to their means. Sacrifices cannot always be demanded of the same people, nor can today's difficulties be systematically passed on to future generations.

Above all, we must stop mistaking responsibility for renunciation. Being responsible does not consist solely of explaining what is no longer possible, what must be cut back, or what we should be given up. It also means knowing how to articulate what we want to preserve, develop, and create.

A sound budget is not a vision for society. It is a means of preserving our capacity to act. And not all spending is created equal: investing in education, research, health care, infrastructure, or the energy transition also means laying the groundwork for our future prosperity and avoiding far greater costs down the road.

We owe this responsibility first and foremost to our youth.

What are we essentially telling our youth today? That they will have to work longer, pay off accumulated debts, face the consequences of climate change, and adapt to unprecedented technological upheavals… all the while grappling with growing difficulties in finding accommodation, pursuing an education, accessing employment, and building their independence.

We cannot leave them an accumulation of constraints and fears as a sole legacy.

A society that ceases to instill in its youth the conviction that they can build a better life, however less comfortable, is a society that jeopardizes its own future. Making youth a national priority cannot be a mere convenient slogan. It must become the guiding principle of our collective choices: in education and higher education, in access to housing and employment, in health policies, in the ecological transition, in mastering technology, and in participation in democratic life.

We must also listen to these young people, not only when they express their anger or concerns, but when they put forward ideas, innovate, get involved, and aspire to take part in the decisions that will shape their future.

In 1944, as France was going through one of the darkest periods in its history, men and women from profoundly different political traditions were able to set aside their disagreements to envision together the country they wanted to rebuild. The National Council of the Resistance's program was not limited to the Liberation Day preparations: it laid out the foundations for a fair and united society, in which future generations would find the means to their emancipation. Obviously, we are not in 1944 anymore. But the lesson remains: even in the most difficult times, political responsibility is not merely about confronting the dangers of the present. It is also about laying the foundations for a promising future.

In 1944, standing in the wreckage, our predecessors were willing and able to envision happier days. Why should not we today be able to build a desirable future for our youth?

Mr. President, Members of the French Government and Parliament,

We ask you to move beyond a mindset of perpetual crisis and drama. To stop allowing tactical clashes in the run-up to the next general elections absorb all the country's political energy. To not only rediscover the courage to cooperate, but also the courage to be ambitious.

We ask you to define a few major national priorities that can be shared across party lines and pursued over the long term. To clearly tell the French people what efforts will be necessary, how they will be distributed, and, above all, what these efforts will serve to build.

We ask you to put the future back at the heart of public debate, and the young at the heart of our collective project.

This is not about denying our differences, nor about making the conflicts that legitimately run through our society disappear. It is about rediscovering what should be the primary purpose of political action: enabling a community of citizens, despite their disagreements, to decide together on their common future.

France does not need more fears. It needs trust, justice, hope, and a collective ambition.

We are not asking to be promised a future without difficulties. We are asking to be given reasons to believe that it is worth building.

So that, together, we rediscover the courage to do so.

About France Universités

France Universités is a non-profit association governed by the French law of 1901, recognized as a public-interest organization and enshrined in the French Education Code. It brings together rectors of universities and public higher education and research institutions, and represents their voice and values in society. France Universités also puts forward proposals in public and political debate, working with decision-makers, higher education and research networks, economic and social partners, and national and international institutions.

Press contact:
Bastien Florenty
Press Officer
bastien.florenty@franceuniversites.fr
+33 6 64 06 69 36