

Students' Representatives report to the School Council – Year 2012

Since our last report to this School Council, new representatives were elected in the Administrative Council, in the Senate, in the NUV and in all Sector Councils. The Students' Representative Council is currently chaired by Claudia Antolini and is composed by 19 representatives. At our meetings are invited the representatives of the research personnel, the members of the committees and (when needed) the president of the SISSA Club. This report has been drafted, submitted to the council for a public discussion and then approved by the Council during its meeting on 21/01/2013.

During these months, students' representatives promoted several activities and took active part in many governing boards of the School. In this report we are going to summarize them together with the problems that we think are still open and need a solution in the shortest time possible.

1. SPACES

The issue of spaces has improved since last year but still some critical situations persist. As students we have appreciated the first attempt of reorganization of spaces and our implication in it.

The destination of the building A-1 to students activities will provide a permanent space for Sissa-club activities and a place where students can gather to discuss and relax and in the same direction goes the opening of the two discussion rooms in the hall.

Again, concerning common spaces we want to stress that the common room at the fourth floor is not just a recreative room but rather is used by many sissa members to cook and preserve their food during festivities or Sundays when the cafeteria is closed. Hence it is important to keep this freely room accessible.

However, we want to stress that the main priority in managing spaces is, of course, to provide all the students, the researchers and the staff with a proper working place. Since the number of SISSA's users has been constantly growing since the moving from the old building, we suggest that the original criteria for assigning rooms may be reviewed to check whether it fits with the current and the expected needs.

To conclude we think that a new policy on common spaces may increase the quality of the interactions between different groups, postdocs and students and we stress that in general the issue of common spaces is strongly felt by students and a general discussion on the topic and less strict regulations would be appreciated.

2. HEALTH AND SAFETY AT THE WORKPLACE

This year a few changes in Prevention and Protection service personnel occurred: Gabriella Rossi, adjunct in Prevention and Protection service, got retired, and Gianluca Pietra from Neurobiology PhD program was appointed as supplementary student representative in the Safety Committee, joining Alessandro Di Filippo from Cognitive Neuroscience PhD program.

Moreover, 2012 has been a critical year for health-and-safety issues in SISSA, as several dangerous, health-threatening events happened. The instances have been investigated by the Safety Committee, which included 2 students representatives.

The Committee expressed the necessity for additional Safety Deputies, people engaged full time to provide help and to properly handle the increasing number of new procedures implemented in SISSA's labs, and the growing number of chemical substances used therein, as well as to monitor the safety conditions of laboratory work of a large number of scientific staff.

Among other suggestions of the Safety Committee subsequently implemented, there were:

- assignment of Tullio Bigiarini and Massimo Righi as full-time Prevention and Protection adjuncts;
- introduction of sanctions in order to enforce compulsory medical check-up for SISSA students, as well as for undergraduate university students carrying out experimental work in SISSA;
- assignment, to each laboratory, of a professor responsible for safety of the tasks performed inside that laboratory;
- increase of safety information sharing among students, by personally handed-in CD-ROMs covering all relevant issues;
- control over personal protection equipment distribution to all scientific staff.

Moreover, the students also recommend for the future that:

- safety information on the CD-ROMs be available also in English language;
- tables of chemical risks and safety recommendations in English language be exposed on each laboratory corridor;
- equipping people working in laboratories during evenings and weekends (given to the necessity of completing tasks in due time also during the absence of Safety Deputies) of a sound and/or light alarm ensuring identification and localization of the people involved in case of an accident (1 alarm device per laboratory) could be a crucial point;
- restricting the access to laboratories during this time to skilled PhD students only, or by improve surveillance of areas where students were supposed to work after their entrance in SISSA could be another possible solution to increase safety outside of administratives' working hours.

Finally, as mentioned in Students' Representatives' report of 2011, an important and still unresolved problem is the lack of communication between the students, especially the younger ones, and their representatives and Safety Deputies.

It has to be underlined, though, that since last year several meetings between students and students' representatives in the Safety Committee lead to an improvement of this situation. Further improvement in bidirectional information exchange will grant the representatives and the officers responsible for the safety a deeper and more updated knowledge of the possible problems: the mutual support will make possible issues more visible, and will enable prevention of possibly dangerous situations.

As a final word, we would like to stress also the necessity of closer collaboration between the people responsible for the labs and SISSA Safety Committee.

3. STATUTE AND REGULATION

The new SISSA Statute came into force on February, 28th 2012.

The election of the students' representatives held in March and April, accordingly to the Statute, elected 20 among PhD courses' representatives, representatives in the Board of Directors, the Academic Senate, the NUV (Evaluation nucleus) and the School Council.

Moreover, on October, 1st the students' representatives in the School executive committees have

been appointed by the Director, according to the proposals by the Students' Council among the members of the Students' council itself. These committees are not disposed by the Statute and act as a support to the Director's tasks: they are the committee for the General Services, the ITCS Users' Committee and the Library Users' Committee. Moreover, one students' representative is invited to the meetings of the Didactics Committee.

As a general consideration, the presence of students' representatives in all the governing bodies – as firmly advocated by the previous representatives - has allowed us to strengthen at all the levels the students' voice and our contribution to the functioning of the school, with information circulating fast and rather efficiently, also by using the students' online forum.

Moreover, the increased number of representatives in the governing bodies allows them to operate and cooperate in sustainable and fruitful fashion, without encumbering on their research projects and duties as students.

We'd like to point out, however, that not all the bodies the Statute prescribes have currently been constituted: the joint committee students/teachers (Commissione Paritetica Allievi-Docenti), whose regulation up to our knowledge hasn't been written yet, which couldn't express its advices about the institution or the suppression of PhD courses which have occurred last year, and above all the Central Guarantee Committee (Comitato Unico di Garanzia) for Equal Opportunities, Workers' Well-being and Non-Discrimination. We deem that the school should comply with the remaining statutory prescriptions as soon as possible.

4. LIBRARY

A really fruitful collaboration with the former Library Head, dr. Andrea Wehrenfennig, has been kept active until his ultimate retirement in Autumn 2012, thus allowing the students to have many useful monographs and textbooks bought by the Library upon direct request (in accordance with a specific initiative first activated in early 2012).

At the same time, in order to better tailor the expenses on the actual needs of the scientific staff, based on functional statistics on requests of single papers and entire journals, changes have been made as regards journal subscriptions and single paper acquisitions.

Introduction in October 2012 of new regulations for the storage of the PhD thesis in Digital Archive, allowed for a broader, and facilitated access to the results of research performed in SISSA. It allowed as well for a better protection of these results, due to a possibility of a student to impose an embargo period for the public access to his/her PhD thesis.

In the near future, acquisition of software by Ebsco Company should further on increase availability and functionality of SISSA library resources. It will be important than to continue direct communication between Library users and Library Head, in order to maintain a valuable feedback, and tailor services provided by the Library according to the needs of the SISSA scientific staff.

5. NUV

A fully-renewed Evaluation Nucleus has been appointed in Autumn 2012. The first meeting was held on November 28th, 2012, with a second meeting on January 17th, 2013.

Ever since its installation, the Committee has been involved in a complex operation of clear definition of its present role, duties and tasks, as provided for by Italian laws 'legge Brunetta' and 'legge Gelmini': its areas of influence and consultative advice power have grown significantly with

respect to the past as the NUV is the main School internal evaluation body and its tasks currently range from auditing to the analysis of the overall quality of PhD Curricula, teachers' CVs, School goals, to SISSA own evaluation criteria.

The complete revision of all the past documentation and of the yearly Students' Questionnaire is currently under development, with new meetings already planned in Spring 2013.

As expressed by the NUV President, the will of the Committee is to work in close collaboration with the Director and the School administration (possibly, much more than in the past), with the common purpose of improving any possible aspect of SISSA life, management and scientific progress; at the same time, the NUV deems it necessary to fully retain all its independence from the others players involved, as it is believed that only in this way the Nucleus can prove to be an effective evaluation organism.

The students remark the importance of the presence of their Representative inside the Committee and are ready to support initiatives and changes aimed at offering safer work conditions, a better learning environment, and improved social interactions if any.

6. STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE

A preliminary check of the results of the 2012 Students' Questionnaire has shown a general improvement of the satisfaction levels with respect to 2011, and a common raising trend in the scores obtained by both the School and each PhD Curriculum.

More to the point, improvements ranging from significant to remarkable can be noticed in the key fields 'Information about ongoing projects', 'Freedom in the choice of the project', 'Effectiveness of the Supervisor' and 'Fulfillment of initial expectations' this is especially true in the Neuroscience Area, which scored far better than 2011.

On the other hand, the drop occurred in other instances, although part of a physiological and thus inevitable oscillation through time, should not be left unnoticed and should be taken as an alarm bell for the administration and for the Didactics Committee.

Notwithstanding the global improvement in the performance of SISSA as a whole, some considerations are worth mentioning:

- To date, the Questionnaire remains the best way to get a grasp of the satisfaction level among students, yet it can be for sure improved in both structure and presentation; the NUV has already expressed its intention to review the present form of the survey and to propose some alternatives better tailored on a small reality such as SISSA.
- In this sense, the percentage of students providing partial answers, or even no answer at all to the questions is still too high; countermeasures should be considered so as to increase the level of feedback and build more reliable statistics.
- Given the 'excellence' demanded and pursued by the School, a lot more can be made to meet the quality standards of similar institutions in Europe and all over the world: the Questionnaire clearly shows that there is large room for improvement in this sense and some interesting point already emerged from the comments by the students, who remain at disposal to interact with the staff, to solve problems, and to better craft the PhD Curricula according to their needs and those of the market.

7. STUDENTS' WIKI

Foreign students may face severe difficulties in understanding and dealing with the Italian bureaucracy as testified by the many questions risen to the student's secretariat as well as to students' representative. For this purpose was created the students wiki page. After four years of service the page contents has increased making the students' wiki page a fundamental tool to get the necessary know how of Italian bureaucracy and internal rules, we want to stress, not only for foreign students. The wiki page contains also many other tips to help students to profit of the many facilities and activities offered by SISSA. As well, many other pieces of information about life in Italy and everyday life advice have been added. This year the project has been funded with a 75 hour fellowship for increasing the quality of the content of the Wiki. We suggest that in the future the project keeps being funded and enriched of useful guidelines.

8. SISSA CLUB

In order to create a unified way to deal with students and workers of SISSA extra activities and to help students get in touch if they share similar interest, during 2011 the SISSA Club was recreated. Many activities are now ongoing or about to start soon: cineclub, drawing courses, slovenian language classes, theatre lab. A sport-activity insurance is automatically provided when enrolling in the club.

We think that the activities of SISSA-club help socialization and enhance the feeling of well being within the workplace; for this reason we hope that its activities keep being funded and that a permanent location for the regular activities is found. In this sense a dialogue has already been opened with the high governing boards.

9. OTHER ISSUES

– ITALIAN COURSE FOR ABROAD STUDENTS

Since last year a course on Italian language and Trieste's culture has been provided by SISSA Medialab. We regard at this initiative as an interesting and useful tool for the integration in the local society of the abroad community working and studying in SISSA. We recommend this project keeps going and improving with the student's suggestions.

– PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

In 2012, an agreement with ERDISU Trieste made it possible to have a team of psychologists visiting SISSA regularly to give students a chance, free of charge, to better deal with personal problems, stressful situations and any other annoying condition related to the work environment and the life as a PhD student.

We remark the importance of such service, and particularly the fundamental role played by the presence of the team here in SISSA on a regular basis; we encourage the Administration and whomever is in charge of such issues to pursue this policy in the future, and we undertake to collect supplementary feedback from the psychologists to further improve life conditions in SISSA.

To conclude, in front of a generally good situations, some initiatives can be taken to further improve the quality of students' life in SISSA. In order to do this we strongly encourage communication between students, their representatives and the permanent staff as well as the members of the administration and those sitting in the governing boards.

Trieste, 24th January 2013

Claudia Antolini
on the behalf of the Consiglio degli Allievi