

Students' Representatives report to the School Council – Year 2013

Since our last report to this School Council, new representatives were elected in the Administrative Council, in the Senate, and in the three Areas. It is to be noted that this report is presented on behalf of the Students' Council in service in 2013. The new Students' Representative Council is currently chaired by Claudia Mancuso and is composed by 22 representatives. At our meetings are invited guests 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 and submitted to the council for a public discussion and then preliminarily approved by the Council during its meeting on June, 5th 2014; the final version was approved electronically on June, 9th 2014.

During these months, students' representatives promoted several activities and took active part in many governing bodies 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.

- Ombudsperson Office

After the last survey dating back to 2011, the IAC had recommended, among the rest, **to give the students access to a tutor** – different from the thesis supervisor – **that could be referred to during the years of their own PhD course**. The aim of this proposal is to avoid that long running problems with the project, delays in the completion of the thesis, disagreement on the topics and the procedures, etc. remain unknown to all but the student and the supervisor themselves until the very end of the course, preventing from a successful graduation and further job opportunities.

In order to comply with this suggestion, **the Teaching Regulation of the PhD courses** – updated in July 2013 – **dictates that each student should choose a tutor** among a list, provided by the Academic Senate, of academics not affiliated to SISSA.

After the approval of the new regulation, we as students started exchanging views with the Direction on this topic, since both sides deemed that this solution was unlikely to turn out to be effective. On one hand, it would require tens of professors to be involved: it would be very likely that they would be collaborators of the supervisors themselves, thus making it difficult for the students to approach them in order to discuss their own problems; on the other hand, each of them is going to intervene very scarcely, possibly without an appropriate understanding of the question at issue and of the SISSA environment in general.

An alternative proposal, coming from a productive collaboration of the Students' Council and the administration, to appoint an academic to serve as students' and postdocs' Ombudsperson was approved by the Senate and the Board of Directors last April. The Ombudsperson is an academic to whom the persons who suffer from a number of issues during their research and not able to fix them in an ordinarily smooth way can refer to and from whom they can get help and support.

This office is already well established in several Higher Education institutes (MIT, Princeton, ...) as well as in a number of private companies.

The Director, after the regulation based on the proposal by the Students' Council was approved by

the governing bodies, appointed prof. Laio as Ombudsperson and prof. Amati as his deputy. **We are confident that by beginning of next academic year they could start to operate.** At the same time, it will be necessary to edit the Teaching Regulation accordingly.

- Health Insurance

During 2013 a major problem arose with the Health Insurance for non-Italian EU students and postdocs.

Following a revision of the agreement between central and regional government, **the Regional Health Service stopped the voluntary enrollment of EU students and postdocs** (the only enrollment possible, since the PhD fellowships and the Research scholarships are exempted from taxes); the problem affected about seven students and thirty postdocs during the year 2013.

Together with the postdocs' representatives **we raised the problem both with the Administration and the central government**, on the occasion of the visit paid to SISSA by the former Minister of Integration Cécile Kyenge (in July).

While an interministerial task-force is still working on the matter, **the Administration** confronted the Regional Health Service for a long time, finally managing to **restore the voluntary enrollment**. For students, the fee is the same as not-EU ones, while for postdocs it became significantly more expensive; a major contribution by SISSA is granted to cover up to 2/3 of the total amount of the fee.

- Research Fellowships

Among the different fellowships and scholarships the School offers, an important resource are the Research Fellowships of category a) (Borse di Ricerca di tipologia a)). **These are fellowships lasting between 3 and 12 months, awarded on external funding in order to let students complete their running projects after graduation.** They are particularly useful when the thesis project has still not produced a publication, or the reviewers asked for further experiments. Under the old regulation, **these fellowships could be awarded only to newly graduated students less than 30 years old**; in such a way, a significant number of graduates who would have needed them would not have been eligible.

In October 2012 the threshold for people with a Master's Degree in Medicine, which needs a longer time, **had been raised to 33 years old**, but this solved the issue only for a very limited number of subjects, and it did not keep into account that students start their PhD at very different ages, for a number of reasons ranging from compulsory military service in their own country to work experiences before entering research.

Several initiatives have been taken during last year in order to tune the issues related to the end of the PhD course, starting from the Teaching Regulation which now allows for an accounted postponement (or anticipation) of the defense. **The repealing of the age limit for the Research Fellowships, achieved in January 2014**, is another important milestone of a road that has recently been completed by explicitly dictating when and how the post-degree fellowships (which are usually awarded before the starting of the PhD course) can be assigned to students towards the end of the PhD course – fixing rules where apparently there were none.

All these initiatives contribute to offer the students the aptest means to successfully complete the thesis project and to be able to apply for a postdoc position. It should be stressed that **balancing between the enforcement of a definite time span for the PhD course and the possibility to carry out the thesis project in the most effective possible way is not an easy task.** It is

apparent that the Ministry is favoring the latter, since the original strict time limit that was present in the PhD Decree has been deleted before the final approval of March 2013. **We strongly believe, anyway, that it is of primary importance for the students themselves to know well in advance how long their project will take, and that means should be offered to overcome the causes of the most serious delays with due advance.** The aforementioned Ombudsman Office is intended to give a significant help.

- Bus disservice

Some supplementary bus 38 rides were deleted during last summer and were not restored in September with the winter service. This caused (and still causes) a **significant overcrowding of the evening rides to downtown Trieste**. On occasion of the Masters' sessions or of public events, SISSA users are forced to get off the bus and to wait for a long time, because of the half an hour interval between two rides. **A joint petition**, written together with the representatives of the administrative staff and signed by about 200 people (among staff, faculty and students) **has been sent to Trieste Trasporti, with negative response**. This topic of general interest, has been raised with the Direction, too. The first response was the institution of the car pooling; moreover, **several contacts with the provincial government followed in order to try and fix the situation, possibly by a modification of the route of line 4.**

- Sports pitch

In the original plans for the refurbishment of SISSA park there was included also a multi-purposes sports pitch; **last spring it has been proposed to eliminate the project** (for which some preliminary works had already been done, such as cutting some of the needed trees) in order to strengthen SISSA budget for unpredicted expenses. At that moment, the decision between starting the works and deleting the project has been postponed. As students' representatives we decided to hold **an online survey** to be sure that the sports pitch still has – after some years from the original decision - the favor of the student body. **The result was overwhelming affirmative.**

- Students' Questionnaire 2013

A glance at the results of the yearly Questionnaire filled in by the students can be summed up as follows:

- There is a **stably high level of satisfaction** concerning the three main areas of the PhD Curricula (education, effectiveness of the supervision, effectiveness of scientific training), confirmed throughout the last three years — data from the past are available for comparison.
- The small number of yearly samples available so far greatly limits the possibility of a genuine statistical analysis of the trends, and strongly suggests to **repeat the Questionnaire during the upcoming years**, thus getting more data. Only in this way the bias due to the scarceness of data (and the relevance of tiny oscillations over short time spans) can be reduced to an acceptable level.
- While the standard of quality perceived by the users remains generally high, **we cannot consider ourselves fully satisfied**, for the premise of the School is **the pursuit of excellence in**

both research and training of the pupils; and we are not yet there, as it appears from the charts. **A serious process of critical analysis of the main issues of the School is herewith convincingly recommended.** More to the point, we ask the PhD Curricula to finally face some well-known problems with their teachers, students and supervisors, and solve them once and for all.

Some interesting elements can also be extracted from the free comments left by the students while filling in the Questionnaire form. While we do not consider such comments as representing anything with statistical significance, still they ought to be considered as precious indications of possible further issues, opportunities and potential weak/strong links in the School structure. A few remarks follow below:

- Safety at workplace: **Danger/safety signs and recorded emergency instructions ought to be available in English besides Italian**; alerts coming from the students concerning safety issues should be addressed more promptly, and fixed accordingly.
- SISSA Administration: on average, it is received as efficient and "user-friendly", but the intrinsic kafkian character of Italian bureaucracy sometimes makes things go horribly wrong, and **some local inefficiencies can really make the difference in perception.** Erasing useless duplication of requests, implementing automation as much as possible, and generally simplifying procedures could provide a huge relief.
- Psychological Assistance: perceived as a strict necessity by some students, but **the facilitators should be able to speak English fluently**, and also the forms ought to be issued in English as well. In general, more emphasis on English language and international standards should be put on all the documentation submitted to the students.
- Students' Representatives: they **should be more present in the life of the School, and closer to the students.** More communication is needed, and more efforts are expected to have a decent amount of empathy and social integration in the School.
- Interdisciplinary Activities: **the quality level of the Colloquia ought to be drastically improved, especially the fine tuning of the lectures for a broad audience** — too often, the speakers plunge into really specific topics, rather than giving a bird's eye view. **A unified, well-planned calendar of lectures, seminars and courses could greatly help those who would like to take part in the activities of other sectors/areas** (in the same fashion, a unified management of the lecture halls booking might solve a long series of issues). Integration with ICTP, UniTS and institutions alike should be strengthened.
- Housing system: **seems to have provided some issues** (difficult/impossible to contact, ineffective, poor choice of rentals, and on average the students seem to have other channels to find an accommodation).

- Report from the Library Committee

During 2013, three main events marked the activity of the committee — and the engagement of the Students' Representative within the commission.

First, efforts were provided to **fully review the subscriptions to journals and online databases**, so to narrow down the selection and meet the requirements of the budget cuts. The analysis was based on usage statistics (especially the number of downloads and the cost per single download) and on specific requests coming from both the academic staff — general preservation of some remote repositories, subscription to paper-only journals of particular significance — and the Library

staff (efficiency increase and cuts of the unnecessary costs). As a consequence, **the Library can now comply with tighter budget constraints**, while still providing an effective service.

Second, a huge **campaign to collect back all the books physically missing** from the shelves was launched in Autumn 2013. The Library staff changed the regulations for the loans and spent much energy to restore the completeness of the catalogue, in this way discovering the lack of many monographs (lost, stolen or simply disappeared over the years). The campaign is still ongoing, although its peak was reached around the end of 2013. Many books found their way back to the shelves of the Library (some of them were simply found as misplaced, but still in the Library repository), **becoming once again usable resources for all the community**.

Third, the Library Head **started another review of the catalogue**, asking this time for help to better place some books within the collection. The collaboration of experts and students, many of them manually alerting the Library staff about possible improvements in the collocation of some books, proved to be pretty effective, and now we all can benefit from a slightly more improved version of the internal classification.

While some of the campaigns launched by the Library staff during 2013 appeared to be potentially nagging for the users — and sporadic critical remarks were raised in this sense — **the new management of the Library proved to be particularly effective in the restoration of the catalogue**, and this can be seen, all in all, as an improvement for everybody.

In reference to the events and issues mentioned above, the students recommend the following:

i) that the procedures related to one's name insertion in — and cancellation from — the Library database be made more effective, i.e. more embedded in the sequence of compulsory bureaucratic steps needed to enter and leave the School, respectively;

ii) that the above procedures, and all the others alike (e.g., the obligatory upload of the thesis before the defence) be more advertised and become better known, especially by the academic personnel, being a natural element of the path towards the PhD;

iii) that the access to the online resources, both internal and external, be made easier and more intuitive, possibly via a restored website, a more refined user interface, and an improved search engine;

iv) that the staff of the Library be aptly supported, and the catalogue duly funded, possibly via opening of bundle subscription in cooperation with other universities/institutions in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region.

- Report from the ITCS Committee

We will present here some topics of interest for students which were discussed during last year related to the ITCS services.

- High Performance computing.

The HPC cluster has been delivered. Works are in progress to build up the electrical and air-conditioning system (expected time ~ 3 weeks).

As stated in the contract, the installation and the tests on the cluster should finish before 4th of June but some more time will be needed for the installation of scientific software and of the queue

system by ITCS staff.

- Old workstations.

The ITCS has a budget to buy a certain number of new workstations per year in order to replace the old and the broken ones.

ITCS usually replaces the oldest workstations but if anyone experiences problem with his/her machine, they are asked to **send a message to the helpdesk notifying the problem.**

- Printing restrictions.

From the periodic analysis of the printers data, ITCS staff **noticed a misuse of the printers by some users.** The committee suggested to set a limit of 8000 pages/year per capita. Unfortunately it is not always possible to “track” all the printed materials, e.g. from laptop with a dynamical IP or directly from USB. The committee decided to **inhibit printing from USB and approved the restriction** (8000 pages/year per capita) that has to be enforced as soon the ITCS staff finds a solution for uniquely identifying a laptop with a dynamical IP.

- Report from the Safety Committee

During last year there has been an important **change of the responsible of the Service of Prevention and Protection (SPP)** as Dr. Ing. Marco Campestrini replaced Ing. Dario Morelli. After few days from his appointment, he asked the students' representatives student for safety to hold a meeting to **point out critical situations and to start a strong collaboration with them.** Indeed, some of the requests reported by students in 2012 have been satisfied, e.g. to replace the tables of chemical risks exposed in each laboratory corridor (in Italian) with other ones in English and the installation of a physical mail box to send anonymous mail about safety to SPP.

The increase of service personnel and of information among the students has led **not to have any critical situations reported during 2013.** The continue updating process adopted by SISSA to completely comply with the Italian d.lgs. 81/2008 law has resulted in the **distribution of the first part of the compulsory course on safety to each worker present in SISSA** including not only the administrative staff but also students and Post-Docs. This course will be attended also by each new person who will work in SISSA for at least two months. After this first course we are going to continue the safety courses in areas which need further specific safety knowledge.

Moreover, the SPP helped by the laboratory members, continued the **cataloguing process of the chemicals** present in the various laboratories. Using the information collected, a new algorithm was used to determine the risk level for each chemical present in laboratories. This work has reported few situations of possible risk which were promptly solved. However, up to now **not all the laboratories have finished to list their chemicals.** We recommend that this task is completed as soon as possible.

Further on, **the evaluation questionnaire of risk and stress correlated to work**, which in 2012 was answered by the administrative staff as an initial testing phase, **was answered also by the student component.** Up to now a commission made up by administrative staff, the safety representative for workers and two occupational psychologists appointed by SISSA to edit this document has been established and has met to discuss the list of the possible questions to be asked to students and Post-Docs.

Moreover, during the last year two evacuation tests have been done. Those tests underlined **some critical aspects to solve which were not yet considered by SPP**, e.g. the arrival of cars to the

gate, especially during the early morning, which can block the road with consequent difficulty to intervene by public vehicles of assistance. However, evacuation tests have reported positive results about evacuation time and order.

Even though much was solved during this year and we are glad to state the existence of a positive will to completely adopt the Italian d.lgs. 81/2008 law, some crucial points still remain without a real answer.

First of all, the problem to **safeguard the students who, due to work reasons, have to perform experiments out of office times still remains unsolved**. Although during these last months a specific commission composed by students' representatives and SPP staff has been established to discuss and solve this particular situation, no important change has yet been decided and applied.

Moreover, the problem of the **lack in security and technical room at second floor of someone who is able to speak English language out of working times still remains**. The absence of someone who can promptly interact in case of emergencies involving non-Italian speakers could create serious problems.

To conclude, we would like to focus the attention on the topic of **maternity in SISSA**: in our opinion, it is necessary to directly address this issue in the future, by combining students' reps, SPP and CUG efforts in providing **more information to the students and a general awareness in the whole community**, through guidebooks and/or open days.

Maternity **should not be seen as an event to be feared**, but on the contrary, it is a situation in which **any occurring complication is addressed by SISSA in the best possible way**, in the best interest of the student and of the child in a welcoming and friendly environment.

- Report from the General Services Committee

During the Academic Year 2013/2014, until now, the General Services Committee has been summoned 4 times, approximately every 2 months, for the following reasons:

- write down the **questionnaire on the bar and canteen service satisfaction** (previous management);
- discuss about the **rules of the tender notice** for the new bar and canteen management;
- decide on the **contribution to the kindergarten fee** for the SISSA employees' children and modify the document "Regolamento di gestione dell'asilo nido della SISSA";
- discuss about the different proposals for the **summer schools contribution** for the SISSA employees' children.

In several other occasions it was asked to the members of the committee to give their advisory opinion about:

- the closure or reduction of the service of the canteen and bar during the holiday periods;
- the evaluation of the English courses report.

- Report from the Students-Professors Joint Committee

After the constitution of the Students-Professors Joint Committee on April, 14th 2013, one meeting was held up to the present day. The following items were discussed:

- Proposal of examination of the International Advisory Committee report of 2011 and of recent data from SISSA Evaluation Nucleus. Suggested **possible integrations of the questionnaire** with regard to single PhD courses about didactic issues.

- Suggestion of a meeting of the Students' Council with the aim of **soliciting the debate among students about sensitive didactic issues**.
- Discussion about **joining the ECTS system** for credit assignation to courses offered in the SISSA didactic system.

In the opinion of the Students' Council, the work of this committee might progress significantly with a growing contribution of the Council itself in order to identify and solve any critical issue and/or improve the quality of the didactics of the whole School.

- SISSA Club

After the change of composition of the Directive Board happened in December, also this year SISSA Club confirmed itself to be a **reference point for the extracurricular activities of SISSA**. Along with the long running Drawing Club, Slovenian course and Board gaming Club, this year **SISSA Club has proposed a great variety of new activities**: an Itinerary in Art History, a Book Club, a French Course, a Photography Course, a Strolling Club and also a Volleyball Team. All these new activities **have been very much appreciated by the SISSA community**, and SISSA Club counts to date about 70 members for the year 2014 (a new record!). Moreover, as usual also this year SISSA Club organized a SISSA group participating to Bavisela, and thanks to a collaboration with MediaLab, the run of this year will be remembered through a video.

Last but not least, the usual and really appreciated Welcome Party and Carnival Party have been organized, as it will be done for the Summer Party in collaboration with the Students' Representatives.

In conclusion, the Directive Board of SISSA Club is highly satisfied with the work done until now and of what will be carried out in the future in order to make SISSA Club an even more fundamental component of the social life of the SISSA community.

To conclude, in front of a generally good situation, 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, 17th June 2014

The Students' Council