QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDENT SURVEY SYSTEM

The School currently implements a self-assessment process aimed at measuring the level of student satisfaction, with a view to improving the quality of its training and scientific activities, as provided for by the ‘Guidelines for Quality Policies’ set out by SISSA. The assessment only involves PhD students regularly enrolled at SISSA and is conducted through an anonymous online questionnaire. Said questionnaire is prepared by the Administration in compliance with the legal requirements and the specific needs of the School. The proposals of the Evaluation Committee and the opinions of the assessment bodies (Quality Assurance Unit, Student-Professor Joint Committee) and of the Students’ Board are followed to ensure the survey gathers pertinent data on:
- the perceived quality of educational courses;
- the quality of student services;
- the quality of support and/or supervision by professors and/or postdocs;
- career aspirations and adaptation to the local and international job market.

For first-year students there is a series of questions dedicated exclusively to the quality of teaching and their expectations of the research project they will carry out, while the questions aimed at students enrolled in subsequent years focus on the quality and efficacy of research, the supervision by Principal Investigators, as well as on career aspirations.

The questionnaire submitted to students in the 2017/2018 academic year was opened in September 2018 and closed at the end of January 2019. It consisted of 63 questions including close-ended questions and multiple-choice questions, plus boxes for free comments. The software architecture and logical operators acting as filters during compiling made it possible to analyse data by research area and by course year.

A few numbers: in the 2017/2018 academic year, the questionnaire was sent to 291 SISSA students. There was a huge 70% response rate, as 203 were compiled totally or partially. This was a clear improvement compared to the 2016/17 academic year which only had a 56% response rate. The increase may be a result of the active engagement of the Quality Assurance Unit, the Student-Professor Joint Committee, students’ representatives and administrative staff.

The feedback from the questionnaire is disseminated in two separate phases: first, the Evaluation Committee submits the data to the governing bodies, the Area coordinators, the Students’ council, the Student-Professor Joint Committee; then, it is the Students’ Council task to review the documentation and prepare a detailed report for the School Council. With the approval of the School Council, the Student representatives then divulge the questionnaire’s findings to the student body.

The Evaluation Committee, acts as an internal assessment body, as foreseen by art.19-bis of the Italian Legislative Decree no. 150/2009, and is responsible for ensuring that users’ satisfaction measuring systems are put in place and respected. The annual questionnaire is a key tool to help the Evaluation Committee understand all of the aspects of the School which have an impact on student life. For this reason, the survey must be regularly revised and perfected. The School’s Annual Report contains an analysis of the student survey by the Evaluation Committee.
Since 2019, within the framework of the Quality Assurance System, the School has called for a more active role of the Scientific Areas in the drafting up of proposals for improvement, based on the Evaluation Committee’s report. The proposals drafted by the Scientific Areas are shared with the Quality Assurance Unit and approved by the governing bodies during the annual planning. Furthermore, in 2019, the Student-Professor Joint Committee has issued a mid-term report, containing a preliminary analysis of the survey and of the Evaluation Committee’s report. The main purpose of the mid-term report is to keep the School’s governing and assessment bodies informed and updated on the work of the Committee and on the development of the Annual Report. In particular, the Student-Professor Joint Committee has decided to interview the students’ representatives in order to better understand some of the issues raised in the survey. Thanks to the School’s consolidated experience in administering student surveys, in May 2018 SISSA took part in a pilot project promoted by ANVUR aimed at PhD students in the 29th and 30th cycle. The aims of the survey were to:
- assess the training path;
- assess the career path;
- assess the acquired research capacity.
The project evaluated the suitability of the solutions chosen and analysed any aspects which had not previously been taken into consideration. The most appropriate contact method and the survey structure were also tested. The participation of current students amounted to 73% (30th cycle), and former students to 56% (29th cycle). At the end of the pilot phase, ANVUR extended the survey to all Italian universities, proposing it for the 31st cycle (deadline 15.07.2019.) As well as making use of student surveys to assess the quality of training and research activities, the School has been taking part in the Good Practice project promoted by the Polytechnic University of Milan since 2013. This project aims to create a shared database together with many other Italian universities to monitor the efficacy and efficiency of their management and administration. The traditional part of the Good Practice project consists of two survey areas: costs/efficiency and Customer Satisfaction, along with the analysis of the Organisational Well-being of the administrative and technical staff, and of the experimental laboratories.
Since 2017, the School has decided to handle the Customer Satisfaction and Organisational Well-being questionnaires independently; to obtain results faster and provide the School’s management with the data needed for reporting. The Customer Satisfaction questionnaire concerning the administrative services provided in 2018 was brought forward to January 2019 and prepared in two different versions based on the type of respondent: one for professors, researchers, post-docs and PhD students, and one for administrative and technical staff. The questionnaire addressed to the scientific community was submitted separately to each category of users to allow a more specific analysis of the responses from each group. The content of the survey for the scientific community focused on the following macro-services:
- HR management and administration;
- supplies and logistic services;
- communication;
- IT systems;
- teaching support;
- research support;
- libraries.

Each macro-service is divided into several sub-topics and specific questions to provide a further detailed analysis.

The independent management of the Customer Satisfaction questionnaire also makes it possible to include additional questions on the support provided by laboratory technicians in the Neuroscience area.

Finally, the School prepares additional questionnaires to evaluate the success of special initiatives (such as the PHD4PMI project) with the dual goal of assessing the level of satisfaction and of identifying opportunities for improvement, to continually challenge ourselves to be better prepared to meet students’ needs and expectations.

Documents and explanatory texts uploaded in the SUA_Scuole database are available on the Quality page of SISSA website, in the section relative to accreditation: https://www.sissa.it/cevs