



Students' and Research Personnel' ombudsperson of the International School for Advanced Studies in Trieste

Introduction

The mission of SISSA consists of scientific research, higher education, and training of young researchers through the courses aimed at awarding the degree of Philosophiae Doctor. The working condition and the general well-being of all the SISSA community have a strong influence not only on the primary mission of the school, but also on the general quality of the scientific research.

The PhD students and the research personnel are, within SISSA community, the ones who more need safeguard. The limited experience, the placement in fixed term positions and the academic practice cause these subjects to heavily depend on their own supervisor (despite these dependence weakens with the experience) both in the scientific activity and in the search for the sequent employment, because of the need of the reference letters. Conflicts that may arise within the research groups and with one's own supervisor, if not managed and solved, may compromise the career of the weaker parts. This is the reason why the Students' Council, in agreement with the Director, propose the establishment of the *ombudsperson office*.

The scope of this office, which is inspired by similar experiences common in the Anglo-Saxon academia, is to offer to students and postdocs an informal interlocutor in order to solve internal controversies within the research group, and in particular in the interpersonal and academic relationship with one's own supervisor. In this sort of situation, the recommended practice to students and postdocs is to look for support by one's own representatives in the Area Council, and then by PhD course and Area coordinator; after failing to personally solve the issues or to resort to traditional means, or whenever the subjects deem the direct approach to be ineffective or detrimental, the ombudsperson is available as an independent, renowned and reserved figure.

Appointment

The ombudsperson is appointed by the Director of the School among a shortlist, consisting of at least three up to five persons, proposed by the Students' Council. The ombudsperson's term lasts four years.

In order to search for candidates, the Students' Council collects the proposal by the students' and the postdocs' representatives. People renowned for their independence, attention to the living and working condition of students and postdocs, neutrality in conflictual situation, and confidentiality, both internal and external to SISSA but anyway afferent to scientific institution in Trieste area are eligible for the office.

The ombudsperson shall be visible and acknowledged in the School; its office shall be advertised, in suitable ways, both in the governing bodies and in some official occasions (School Council, Welcome Day) and in the daily life of the School (by the Students' representatives, on Students' Wiki...).

Role and tasks

SISSA ombudsperson is an independent, neutral and confidential resource for the students' and the postdocs.



The ombudsperson helps people looking for a confidential way to discuss or deal with issues related to conflicts that may arise among the members of the research groups, and in particular between supervisor and supervised. He/she offers support in solving the problem and provides a context in which to face the situations one cannot personally manage, because of the people involved or the fear for retaliation.

A non comprehensive list of issues for the ombudsperson office is the following:

- Dispute on the research project and methodology
- Academic morality (acknowledgement, attribution and usage of the results)
- Supervisee-Supervisor relationship
- Relationships within the research groups
- Inadequate and/or unacceptable requests and conduct on the work/study place

Who resort to the ombudsperson office (*inquirer*) has the right to find an interlocutor who

- listens with attention and respect;
- is easily accessible and trustworthy, in a condition which grants him/her to behave in a neutral and independent way;
- above all, is able to help people to help themselves, providing information and advices so that the problems can be solved at the lowest possible level in the organisation;
- can help in managing conflicts, verifying the facts and being available for mediating and confronting with the sides of the controversy.

Ombudsperson and Confidential Counsellor

The behaviours and situations laying on the borderline between the ombudsperson and the Confidential Counsellor (harassment and workplace bullying) tasks must be carefully addressed.

The ombudsperson neither conducts formal inquiries nor has any role in the disciplinary process, both formal and informal, that is started by reports of sexual harassment and workplace bullying according to the Code of Conduct for the protection of the dignity of female and male employees and students of SISSA. Whenever the ombudsperson, in pursuance of his/her role, gains knowledge of such events, he/she addresses the inquirer to the Confidential Counsellor, honouring the pledge of confidentiality.

Principles of practice

Independence

The ombudsperson is immediately subject to the Director. Once a year, the ombudsperson issues a report to the Direction of the School with the consolidated data of his/her activity, possibly together with proposals and remarks he/she deems worthy of discussion in the dedicated committees and bodies of the School (Comitato Unico di Garanzia, governing bodies). In pursuance of his/her own role, the ombudsperson acts according to the principles of this regulation



and of his/her own experience; any interference in his/her conduct, by colleagues or superiors, is mostly improper.

Confidentiality

The activities of the ombudsperson are confidential. The ombudsperson shall report neither the names nor the topics he was addressed by the inquirers, save that he/she gets explicit consent, in order to analyse the situation and/or solve the conflict at the informal level. The only exception to the pledge of confidentiality is where there appears to be an imminent risk for the safety and health.

Informality

The recourse to the ombudsperson is encouraged for all the situation in which the direct confrontation between the student/postdoc and the supervisor – even if mediated by the students' and postdocs' representatives –, or the appealing to the PhD course coordinator/responsible of the research group is deemed to be ineffective. The ombudsperson provides the inquirer with instruments for the resolution of conflicts that are independent from the disciplinary procedures of the School and of the academic system (Disciplinary Committee, official reprimands...). The actions by the ombudsperson shall be planned and agreed upon together with the inquirer: the only case in which the ombudsperson shall act without the consent of the inquirer is where there is an imminent risk of harm. The ombudsperson, according to his/her own judgement and the indications by the inquirer, can give advice and information about the most appropriate way to solve the conflicts; he/she can request additional material to verify the facts and conduct informal inquiries, gathering depositions from all the sides involved; he/she can facilitate the discussion and the mediation between the sides, both as a mediator (attending to the meetings between the sides) or as a shuttle diplomat, when the confrontation between the sides is not possible.

Ombudsperson's tasks and instruments

Listening. First of all, the inquirer has the need and the right to be carefully and actively listened to. The ombudsperson is an impartial part to whom the inquirer can refer without consequences or fear of judgement.

Giving and receiving information. The ombudsperson gather information about practise and (mis)conducts internal to the research groups and Areas; he/she provides the inquirer with clarification about internal procedures and persons in charge, also attending him/her in the subsequent actions.

Analysing the problem. The ombudsperson may ask the inquirer to provide material and testimony in support of his/her procedure, and may conduct confidential inquiries with the people involved in the case.

Helping people in a direct approach. The ombudsperson may help an inquirer to deal directly with his/her own supervisor. He/she may give advice about how to deal with the issues, supporting the inquirer capability to intervene without the need of a third-party intervention.

Informal third-party intervention. The inquirer may ask the ombudsperson to intervene between him/her and the other side of the conflict, or to act – with the consent of the other side – as a



mediator. Moreover, the ombudsperson may accompany the inquirer to the Director, or may directly report the issue to the Direction, with the consent of the inquirer, whenever he/she deems it is the most efficient behaviour.

Recommendation to the School management. The ombudsperson, in his/her yearly report and whenever he/she deems it to be appropriate, recommends to the School management and the Comitato Unico di Garanzia the procedures and innovation that may be implemented in order to deal with common or widespread causes of complaints and concern.