



IUSS

Scuola Universitaria Superiore Pavia

ANNUAL REPORT
YEAR 2021
JOINT STUDENTS AND PROFESSORS
COMMITTEE
PhD COURSES

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1 Evaluation of PhD Programs

Legend:

UME: Understanding and Managing Extremes

NCFM: Cognitive Neuroscience and Philosophy of Mind (Neuroscienze Cognitive e Filosofia della Mente)

SBB: Biomolecular Sciences and Biotechnology (Scienze Biomolecolari e Biotecnologie)

SDC: Sustainable Development and Climate change

1.1 Evaluation of Teaching and Research

1.1.1 Introduction

The survey of PhD students' satisfaction with teaching and research was carried out in November 2021, involving 69 students enrolled from the second year onwards in the PhD cycles. There were 54 responders, with a response rate of 78.3%, slightly decreased compared to 80.3% in the previous year. 53.7% of responders were Italian, and the remaining 46.3% were foreign.

The differentiation of the response rates for each course is illustrated:

- NCFM = 100% (100% 2019/20 – 77.8% 2018/19)
- SBB = 57.9% (64% 2019/20 – 52.2% 2018/19)
- UME = 80% (86.7% 2019/20 – 63.3% 2018/19)

1.1.2 Summary of results

The first question shows that the main activity of PhD students is related to research activities, with percentages in line with those of 2019/20.

To the question "Are you expected to perform activities not related to your research programme" the percentage of students who answered "Never" increased from 30.2% to 77.8%, with the most significant increase for SBB doctoral students.

There was a significant increase in the percentage of students who stated that they had never had exchanges with other researchers or research groups within the school: this rose from 28.3% to 42.6%, while the percentage of exchanges outside the school remained in line with the previous year.

The increase in satisfaction with the availability of space is worth noting. This is mainly due to the provision of premises in the new rented building and the available equipment. The overall assessment of the research environment is positive for 85.2% of the students (90.5% the previous year).

Satisfaction with the courses provided regarding the perceived quality of teaching activities remains consistent with the previous year's results. However, there was a drop in satisfaction within the SBB course, with 18.2% of respondents partially dissatisfied, a percentage that was absent last year.

Satisfaction with the relevance of the topics covered in the courses fell for NCFM doctoral students, with 9.1% of students saying they were totally dissatisfied (no such percentage last year);

The percentage of dissatisfaction also increased for UME, with 3.1% more respondents rating it as Absolutely negative.

Concerning the activities (both teaching and seminars), 18.2% of the SBB respondents stated that those activities were never delivered in English and 9.1% that they were rarely delivered; for the seminar activities, 18.2% (also from SBB) stated that they were never delivered in English.

In conclusion, the general assessment of the teaching activities is very positive, with a satisfaction rate of 94.5% compared to 88.7% last year.

About 30% of the respondents believe that they did not receive enough information about the courses, with very high percentages concentrated especially in UME (43.8% answered More No than Yes), while for SBB only 18.2%.

25.9% of doctoral students consider the number of lecturers on their course too small, with the highest percentages for UME and NCFM; the overall quality of the lecturers improves, assessed as appropriate by 83.3% of respondents (72% in 2019/20).

The overall assessment of the practical organisation of the courses is positive, with only 14.8% of PhD students expressing partial dissatisfaction.

The overall assessment of their doctoral programme is largely positive (96.2% satisfaction), although slightly down from 100% in the previous year, also confirmed by the fact that 94.4% of respondents say they would recommend enrolling in IUSS doctoral courses.

See attachment n° 12

1.1.3 Considerations of the Joint Committee

The surveys confirm a good overall evaluation of the courses. However, from the comments emerge requests for greater flexibility in choosing courses that are more relevant to their research project and their topics of interest or from a different institution.

Particularly for the UME PhD, there is a request for more specific courses on topics of interest (advanced numerical analysis, seismic design and retrofit of structures and infrastructure systems, structural health monitoring), including courses at other universities and research centres. These comments are also related to the fact that some of the courses offered to UME doctoral students overlap with those of the IUSS Master's degree (Civ Risk). Consequently, some doctoral students state that the current course offer does not fully meet their learning expectations and does not provide the required level of in-depth study for their projects. The request for access to licences for software of interest (Matlab, Office) is also reported.

1.2 Evaluation of student services

1.2.1 Introduction

The survey on the general services offered to students in the IUSS School doctoral programs was administered online to all PhD students enrolled as of May 1, 2021.

Sixty-nine students were involved. There were 55 respondents with a response rate of 79.2%, a slight increase with respect to the 77.7% recorded one year ago. Among the respondents 32 were Italian and 23 were foreign, while response rates varied among the three doctoral programs: 100% for NCFM, 61.1% for SBB, and 82.5% for UME.

It is worth noting that the questionnaire has changed since last year: new questions regarding the Tutor have been introduced, and two separate sections regarding Placement and Erasmus+ have been implemented. Up to the previous survey the evaluation of the two services was cumulative, and it was

not possible to express a consistent judgment. Therefore, the current questionnaire allows to assess 5 areas: Information Technologies, Tutor, Placement, Erasmus+, General Assessments.

1.2.2 Summary of results

The data concerning 2020/21 highlight decreased satisfaction concerning the *email service* in all the three doctoral courses (including 9.10% of partially dissatisfied users in the SBB doctoral program, for which no complaint about email services had been previously recorded). Conversely, there is a marked increase of satisfaction (from 27.3% in 2019/20 to 98.2%) concerning *Wi-Fi coverage*, which represented one of the most persistent critical issues in past years.

Only 58.2% of respondents answered to the new questions about the *Tutoring service*, which therefore appears to be not fully exploited by PhD students. In this respect, it is worth noting that a small percentage of EMU students (4.3%) reported difficulties in contacting their tutor. Importantly, however, the Tutoring service was deemed useful by those students who took advantage of this opportunity.

Concerning *Placement* services, only 9.1% reported their participation in initiatives organized by the School, which were considered useful by 40% of them.

The data regarding the *Erasmus+* service was not taken into consideration, as the low number of respondents did not allow to guarantee anonymity.

Overall, and in line with the previous assessment, the *general evaluation* of the services offered to PhD students is highly positive, with a satisfaction rate of 94%.

See attachment n° 10

1.2.3 Considerations of the Joint Committee

As previously reported, the results of this survey confirm the need to spread the opportunities provided by the Placement and Erasmus+ services. Partially related to this point, several comments highlight the request for improved communication for international students, particularly concerning information necessary in the first phase of arrival in Pavia and integration into the IUSS community, which are also expected to increase students' engagement in the IUSS community. This issue seems to be at least partially eased by the appreciation for the Tutoring services. Moreover, the Joint Commission has already addressed the difficulties faced by incoming students (particularly those from abroad) by collecting, with the crucial support of student members, several suggestions concerning the information which is felt crucial. The resulting document is supposed to prompt the drafting, by the start of the next academic year, of a "welcome guide" with practical directions and information about the city and the School. Some comments additionally suggest to schedule the "Welcome days" for PhD students close to the starting of the academic year.

1.3 Evaluation of Distance Learning

1.3.1 Introduction

For the year 2021, the School has decided to involve PhD students in the evaluation of Distance Learning. The same Joint Committee has proposed and approved the text of the evaluation questionnaire, with the appropriate changes compared to that used for ordinary courses. The Quality Praesidium subsequently approved the questionnaire, allowing its administration in June 2021. The respondents were 47 out of 69 (response rate 68.1%), differently distributed among the three doctoral programmes.

1.3.2 Summary of results

1st section - Adequacy of the activation of online teaching

The level of satisfaction is extremely high, with percentages of positive responses that are always over 65% for all proposed questions. Obviously, the most penalized aspect was that of participatory teaching methods, and the PhD programme where most of the negative evaluations were expressed, albeit minimal, is that of Biomolecular Sciences and Biotechnology.

2nd section - Problems

The percentage of students who have encountered problems during the period of distance learning is only 12.8%, and the main problems reported are those related to the use of the various platforms. However, this should also consider the small incidence of the number of respondents on the total number.

3rd section - Evaluation of activities

This section was specifically introduced for doctoral students. The evaluation of the practical activities has obviously suffered most from the emergency period and the distancing; in particular, the negative evaluations are those from the students in the UME and NCFM programmes. For the SBB programme, a high percentage responded neutrally (value three on the scale from 1 to 5), probably since access to the laboratories, although in a controlled manner, was always possible.

4th section Overall evaluation

The evaluations outlined above illustrate a substantially positive evaluation which, however, is not reflected in the final overall evaluation, where the use of distance learning does not receive the majority of consensus:

- almost 40% of respondents believe that it negatively impacted the quality of the courses/programme;
- more than 50% of students are not satisfied and do not consider it as effective as traditional face-to-face/in-person teaching;
- about 30% do not feel they want to use it even in a normal situation.

See attachment n° 11

1.3.3 Considerations of the Joint Commission

Distance learning was also adopted for the 2020/2021 academic year due to the continuing COVID-2019 emergency.

In light of the opinions expressed in the questionnaires, the current assessment is positive overall. However, the students have faced some issues, and most of them wish for a return to in-person activities, should the situation allow it. Distance teaching has proved to be an emergency solution of good quality but improvable.

The PhD students stated to be pretty satisfied, although not particularly excited, about the adequacy of the solutions adopted. However, it is worth noting the lower than average evaluation from students in the Biomolecular Sciences and Biotechnology (SBB) PhD programme, which also registers an extremely low response rate to the questionnaires compared to the other programme.

The course Cognitive Neuroscience and Philosophy of Mind (NCFM) shows the largest number of problems, often significant, related to distance teaching; among these, the technical issues with the

platform used and the lack of connections with colleagues are the most significant, but not the only ones to be reported.

Overall, it seems that distance teaching has not completely inhibited carrying out face-to-face/in-person activities, where required (C1). However, it has hindered the projects of numerous PhDs (C2), particularly within the Cognitive Neuroscience and Philosophy of Mind (NCFM) programme. Nevertheless, no students selected the lowest score among all PhD programmes, indicating complete stoppage of research projects due to this modality. Yet, for the NCFM programme, 44.4% (against a School average of 10.6%) selected the second-lowest score available and none the highest (against a School average of 36.2%).

In general, there is scepticism about the perfect equivalence of distance learning with traditional teaching, especially for the NCFM programme, which seems to have suffered more than the other programme from the absence of the usual teaching and research methods. Nevertheless, the use of the former to support the latter is considered positive, with some slight reservations only for the SBB programme, while the UME PhD students strongly advocate it.

It is worth highlighting some student comments, all coming from the UME programme, particularly the disappointment for the lack of short courses; most of the other comments focus on the lack of or more challenging personal/human interactions with distance learning.

In conclusion, to improve the use of distance learning, the Joint Commission suggests more sensitive monitoring of the problems encountered to identify them more precisely, a necessary prelude to their resolution. Undoubtedly, to ensure more personal contacts between students and lecturers, the resumption of traditional teaching is strongly encouraged, with the advice to alternate, for certain activities, traditional teaching to distance learning, which could prove to be convenient and beneficial, especially for the UME course. In the other courses, an ad-hoc evaluation is suggested for each specific case, agreed upon between faculty and PhD students, depending on individuals' specific situations, needs, and preferences.

1.4 Evaluation of PhD admission 21/22

1.4.1 NCFM, SBB, UME

Acronyms:

NCFM	Cognitive Neuroscience and Philosophy of Mind
SBB	Biomolecular Sciences and Biotechnology
UME	Understanding and Managing Extremes

The survey was distributed to 24 students admitted to the courses for the academic year 21/22.

The response rate per course is very positive, being 100% for NCFM and UME and 92.8% for SBB that shows a good increase with respect to the previous year (83.3%).

The question “did you know the IUSS PhD programs before applying” shows an increase of the negative responses, with almost 35% of replies in the two lower categories. The result is driven mainly by the negative evaluations of SBB and NCFM students, while UME shows more positive evaluations with respect to the previous academic year. The same trend is clear with respect to the assistance received, where SBB shows some negative answers, although limited. The overall figure at the IUSS level shows an improvement (from 83.3% to 87%), driven by the larger number of positive replies of NCFM and UME students. The joint committee suggests improving the number and types of information provided

to the students, especially for what concerns the SBB programme, and underlines the need to improve the level of support from the teaching staff and PhD offices.

The replies to the section related with the IUSS website are overall positive, with few exceptions. The online application is evaluated positively, while the description of doctoral programmes and career paths show some negative answers. The “very negative” category, that was not present in the academic year 20/21, represents 8.7% of the replies in the year 21/22, driven by the negative answers of SBB students. Even the UME programme shows an increase of the “more negative than positive” replies, although very limited. The joint committee underlines the importance of monitoring the results of the questionnaire of the next academic year, especially of SBB students, to evaluate the effectiveness of the adopted solutions. In relation to the information about the faculty, doctoral students and their research, it is important to underline the lowering of the percentage of “more negative than positive” replies, which means that the students were able to find more information on such aspects. It is also useful to stress the improvement of the information provided in English that is positively evaluated by the students.

Regarding the advice and service provided by the teaching board/staff in the welcome and enrolment process there is an overall improvement, with no negative answers. On the contrary, and for the UME programme students only, there is a significant increase of negative answers with respect to the information received about the School campus and city life. The School is already working to improve the type and number of information provided to students, both CO and PhD. Therefore, the joint committee underlines the importance to continue the improvement process, with the involvement of PhD representatives and PhD students already at IUSS that could give support to the newcomers.

The joint committee considers especially relevant the large number of general comments provided by the students (22 comments). Nine out of twenty-two replies are positive or do not give any particular suggestions. The remaining thirteen comments are in line with the answers to the questions of the questionnaire. The students request more information on the courses, career paths, campus life and calendar, as well as on the “daily life in Pavia” (e.g. student cards, benefits, discounts) and bureaucratic procedures (this applies especially to non-EU students). Some comments are related to VISA issues, health insurance, accommodation. The joint committee underlines the importance of providing the students, especially those from outside the EU, with information and support to help obtain the necessary documents to live in Italy.

Similar replies can be found in the part of the questionnaire related to Teaching and Research. Foreign students express their concerns in relation to the type and quality of communications and in finding information. They also require more assistance for the bureaucratic procedures for the residence permit. On this aspect, the joint committee has suggested the preparation of a “welcome kit” with information regarding the city of Pavia and bureaucratic procedures.

See attachment n° 13

1.4.2 Sustainable Development and Climate change (SDC)

The response rate is very high (almost 94%).

It is evident from the questionnaire that most of the students were not aware of the SDC PhD programme before applying (almost 70% of replies are in the two lower categories). This can be explained by the fact that the SDC programme was activated for the first time in the academic year 21/22 and that it takes time for University students to get to know the new programme and before it becomes well known at the national level. An important result is represented by the overall positive evaluation of the assistance received, with only a few negative answers (7.6% if the two lower categories are summed). The general comments section includes several comments related to the assistance received by the students from IUSS. The analysis of the comments is presented below.

The IUSS website section was well evaluated in general, with only the results of two questions that show some negative answers. The description of career paths are overall positively evaluated, with only 16.2% of the respondents that consider the description not satisfactory. The same applies to the answers related to information about the faculty, doctoral students and their research. There is an overall satisfaction of such information, with 23.7% of the replies in the lower categories. However, the very negative replies represent only 2.2% of the answers. The joint committee suggests improving the description of these two aspects on the website.

Similarly to the NCFM, SBB and UME programmes, there is a general dissatisfaction on the information received about the School campus and city life, with 33.3% of the answers in the two lower categories. It should be underlined however that almost half of the respondents replied “Don’t know”.

The same considerations already provided for the NCFM, SBB and UME PhD programmes apply to the new PHD in Sustainable Development and Climate change. The joint committee underlines the importance of providing the students with information and support about the Campus, IUSS School and the daily and “social” life in Pavia.

The joint committee considers especially relevant the large number of general comments provided by the students (88 comments). Twenty-nine out of eighty-eight comments are positive or do not give any particular suggestions. The remaining fifty-nine comments are in line with the answers to the questions of the questionnaire. The students request more information on the courses, career paths and calendar. The majority of comments are however related to the timeliness of responses to emails. The overall appreciation of the effort and clarity of the answers is evident; however, the students request to receive more timely and quick replies. The SDC PhD programme started this year; therefore, some adjustments are needed with respect to the number of staff members at IUSS working in the offices dedicated to PhD students, including the new SDC programme. Relatively high priority might also be given to the insertion of PhD courses list, and information on the refund budget. The IUSS website does not yet include such information that is considered very important by PhD students and mentioned several times in the comments section. The joint committee underlines the importance of adding more information on the IUSS website, especially on the above listed topics.

See attachment n° 14

1.5 Improvement Plan for the year 2022

Phd Programs

Target 1	Improvement curriculum
Activities	Evaluation of the range of courses suggested by the students and possible increase in the courses offered by the School
Deadline	30th September 2022
Monitoring indicators	Increase in the number of courses directly taught in the doctoral programmes involved in the action for improvement

Target 2	Improvement curriculum
Activities	Sending proposal to PhD Coordinators for the inclusion in the doctoral programmes of courses provided by other institutions
Deadline	30th September 2022
Monitoring indicators	Yes/No

Services

Target 1	Tracking Tools adopted in Improvement Plan 2021
Activities	Evaluation of the use of FAQs boxes and forums
Deadline	30th September 2022
Monitoring indicators	N° of requests received in FAQs and N° of Forum conversations

Target 2	Promoting participation in the Erasmus+ programme
Activities	Drafting a communication promoting the Erasmus programme
Deadline	28th February 2022
Monitoring indicators	Proposal sent Yes/No

Suggestion for improvement activities:

- Investment in software to make available to PhD students to enable research activities.