

ILLC PhD Programme Evaluation 2019

Institute for Logic, Language and Computation
University of Amsterdam
16 December, 2019

Introduction

The ILLC PhD Programme eValuation Committee (PVC) monitors the quality of the ILLC PhD programme and the working conditions and well-being of its PhD candidates. At the same time, the committee members act as independent confidants to whom PhD candidates can address their concerns and worries.

The main task of the PVC is to perform an extensive annual evaluation of the ILLC PhD programme. As of 2016, this evaluation consists of two parts. First the committee gathers information from all PhD candidates by means of an online questionnaire. The PVC questionnaire addresses all kinds of aspects of a PhD project, including organisational matters, supervision, training, teaching tasks, networking, practical matters, workload, career planning, etc. Second, the PVC selects some candidates for individual and confidential meetings with PVC members; by default this selection includes all candidates who are in their second year and those who are overdue (after their fourth year). All of the topics listed above can be discussed in more detail during these meetings.

The PVC of 2019 consisted of Nick Bezhanishvili (chair), Debbie Klaassen (secretary), Karolina Krzyżanowska, Ekaterina Shutova and Jakub Szymanik. Out of the 59 candidates affiliated with the institute on 1 October 2019, 52 were invited to fill in the questionnaires (the other 7 are employed elsewhere). The committee received 41 completed questionnaires, and interviewed 21 PhD candidates. This includes all candidates in their second year, 10 in total, and candidates who are beyond their fourth year, 5 in total. The PVC further invited 5 candidates and 1 candidate requested an interview themselves. In this report we present our main findings and recommendations. Most of these recommendations are addressed to the PhD programme management, but some are directed towards the supervisors of PhD candidates, and/or to the ILLC community as a whole.

Findings and recommendations

Based on the responses to the questionnaire and our meetings with individual PhD candidates, we believe that the ILLC generally provides an excellent environment for the training of young researchers. The PhD candidates form a vibrant, motivated and intellectually creative community. In particular, the large majority of ILLC PhD candidates are happily and productively working on exciting research projects, guided by committed supervisors. Nevertheless, there is always room for further improvement. We have grouped our main findings and recommendations by topic.

We start by mentioning that in some individual cases, which we are not going to list below, we have taken some action already. In most cases this was to

suggest a change in the supervision team, often by recommending a new co-supervisor.

Supervision

It is by now a rule that every PhD candidate should have a second supervisor who is involved in the project and who can take a lead in case the first supervisor becomes unavailable. The absolute majority of the PhD candidates, but not all of them, do currently have a second supervisor. Together with the PhD management team and PhD supervisors, the PVC will work to ensure that all the candidates have a second supervisor.

We also do not fully approve the practice of a *pro forma* promotor. We think that this should be avoided as much as possible, since having a real promotor helps to have extra checks on the progress of the candidate. In the cases, when the *pro forma* promotor is unavoidable, we suggest that the promotor still takes interest and meets with the daily supervisor and candidate at least once every 4-6 months.

Another issue that we would like to point out is that it should be clear to the PhD candidates what their supervisors expect of them in terms of scientific output and other matters, and what can they expect from their supervisors in terms of guidance support and feedback. This is very important in case of interdisciplinary projects, especially when the supervisors work in different fields and often at different institutions.

Moreover, supervisors at the Faculty of Humanities are often too busy with teaching due to the excessive teaching load. We would like to ask the management team to make sure that the supervisors are adequately gratified in terms of the teaching hours for the supervision activities. Current system assigns very few hours for supervision making the whole system unsustainable.

Recommendation 1: The PhD management team should make sure that every PhD candidate has at least two supervisors. The second supervisors should be urged that they are expected to meet with their students at least once every 4-6 months.

Academic Skill Courses

We would like to comment that the quality of the academic skill courses has improved considerably over the years, for which the PhD management team deserves praise. The course that was especially appreciated by the students this year is the time management course. Many students have also found the academic writing and presentation courses very useful, although they wished they took them in their first year, since these are the skills that the candidates need to acquire from the very beginning. We have learned, however, that the control to some of these successful courses will be transferred back to the Faculty of Science and the ILLC will have a little say on their composition, which is a bit worrying. The fear is that the quality of these courses may drop again. In addition, the schedule of these courses is not fixed yet and the webpage was a bit misleading on this. But we were reassured by the management team that this will be corrected soon. Finally, some PhD candidates also expressed interest in taking some teaching courses.

Recommendation 2: We advise the management team to control the quality of the Faculty of Science skills courses before making the decision about the transfer.

Also, we recommend rescheduling the academic writing and presentation skills courses to the first year of the PhD programme.

Community building

While most of the PhD candidates have a strong affinity with the ILLC and consider themselves integrated in the community, not all candidates are fully aware of the research conducted at the ILLC outside of their research groups. PhD candidates remark that the PhD lunches which were successfully organised in the past, provided a great platform to tackle this problem. These lunches became less frequent in the last year. We would also like to encourage more joint seminars between different groups.

Recommendation 3: We recommend the management team to encourage PhD candidates to self-organise (the PhD council could also be involved in coordination) in terms of PhD lunches and, for instance, other seminars where PhD students could discuss their work in progress among themselves.

Welcoming package

The PVC strongly advises the PhD management team to prepare a “Welcoming package” for the new PhD candidates. First, this could serve as a proper welcome for these individuals to the ILLC community. Additionally, this could also contain some useful information. For example, whom to contact for computer support, for mechanical problems in the office (e.g., a broken window or door), etc. All this could also be summarised in an email sent to the candidate in the first day of their employment. We also recommend the institute to adopt the successful schema of student mentors from the Master of Logic programme. That is, we suggest that every new PhD candidate is assigned a mentor, a more senior PhD candidate, who will guide them into the community of other PhD candidates as well as will help them with the practical matters. We would also like to encourage supervisors to introduce the new PhD candidates to their colleagues. Also, a lunch organised for new PhD candidates to meet each other is an option that the management team could consider.

Recommendation 4: We advise the management team to prepare a “Welcoming package” for the new PhD candidates and to create a PhD mentoring system.

Teaching and organisational tasks

PhD candidates are generally satisfied with the amount and the kind of teaching activities that they are involved in. Some indicate that the point-based system is not entirely clear to them, and that the number of points assigned to a course should perhaps be flexible. Another suggestion made by several PhD candidates is that points should not only be given for teaching activities, but also for PhD council and other organisational work. We would like to invite the management team to explore this possibility.

While the point-based system exercised for the PhD candidates at the Faculty of Science is not always clear or adequate, it seems that at the Faculty of Humanities there is no system at all and the PhD candidates feel that their teaching duties are assigned a bit randomly. They do not even know which and how many courses they will teach in the next semester, and how their teaching is going

to be rewarded. This is definitely a very problematic situation, which needs to be resolved. The PVC fully understands that this issue could be beyond the powers of the management team, but nevertheless asks it to do all it can to “protect” and provide a fair treatment of the PhD candidates at the Faculty of Humanities.

Recommendation 5: We advise the management team to ensure, as much as it can, equal treatment of all PhD candidates in the institute, no matter to which faculty they belong.

Career perspectives

There is a demand among PhD candidates for more information about career perspectives, both within and outside academia, especially about the latter. The PhD candidates often do not know how to prepare for job interviews outside academia. There is definitely a need for a high quality course teaching this kind of practical skills. Here we would also like to mention a very negative feedback that we received from PhD candidates about the advice offered by UvA Pro, which does not seem to be suitable at all for highly qualified candidates like graduates of the ILLC PhD programme. Furthermore, it seems that the PhD candidates at the ILLC do not have full access to information on the career courses offered at UvA.

Recommendation 6: We would like to ask the management team to explore what kind of adequate career advice courses it could offer to the PhD candidates at the ILLC.

Legal advice

Finally, we note that there are a number of PhD candidates with joint appointments at different universities, often in different countries. With the current collaboration schemas between UvA and other universities, for example, the University of Edinburgh, we expect that there will be more of such positions. This is a positive trend. However, it comes with a small drawback for the PhD candidates that they have to deal with two or more legal systems for their contract, taxes, etc. While there is probably not much that the ILLC can do, we still advise the management team to look into the issue and maybe suggest a legal adviser at UvA who could help the candidates with these matters.

Recommendation 7: We recommend that PhD candidates with joint appointments in different countries get advice on solving the issues during the intake interview and later be offered support whenever needed.

Amsterdam, 16 December, 2019

Nick Bezhanishvili

on behalf of the PVC 2019