

**ILLC PHD PROGRAMME EVALUATION 2022**  
**INSTITUTE FOR LOGIC, LANGUAGE AND COMPUTATION**  
**UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM**

1. 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. All of the topics listed above can be discussed in more detail during these meetings. In 2022, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the progress and well-being of the PhD candidates were explicitly discussed during the interviews.

The PVC of 2022 consisted of Benno van den Berg (chair), Karolina Krzyzanowska, Sandro Pezzelle and Makiko Sadakata. Out of the 59 candidates affiliated with the institute on 1 April 2022, 39 were invited to fill in the questionnaires (the other 15 were employed elsewhere and 5 were not invited due to temporary inactivity). The committee received 37 completed questionnaires, and interviewed 18 PhD candidates. This includes all candidates in their second year, 11 in total, and candidates who are beyond their fourth year, 3 in total. The PVC further invited 4 candidates for interviews. 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.

2. 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. The typical ILLC PhD student is a happy PhD student.

Nevertheless, there is always room for further improvement. In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic that started to affect the Netherlands around March 2020 had a negative impact on the academic progress and well-being of some PhD candidates. We have grouped our main findings and recommendations by topic.

**2.1. Social cohesion.** The main issue which came up during the meetings was a feeling of isolation caused by the pandemic, with negative consequences for academic progress and mental health. Doing a PhD asks a lot from the student: working at the highest academic levels, while also dealing with publication pressure and rejection can be tough at the best of times. But the pandemic exacerbated this: it isolated people from each other while also creating a general atmosphere of uncertainty. Fortunately, right now these negative effects of Covid-19 do not affect our community to the same extent as they used to. But even when the pandemic is, in some sense, behind us, students are still dealing with its after-effects and we feel that this should not be underestimated by supervisors and the institute alike.

We feel there is a pressing need to recreate a sense of social cohesion. The following developments worry us in this regard.

- (1) Quite a few PhD students say that they do not feel part of the ILLC. They feel part of a certain research group (or of one of our sister institutes such as the CWI), but the ILLC as such does not mean as much to them. With the institute now being split over ever more locations, this may be even more of a concern.
- (2) The PhD council has not been very active in the last couple of years.
- (3) Many people have started working in a hybrid fashion, with this being encouraged from several quarters. However, this results in many empty offices and fewer occasions to meet people randomly and informally (at the coffee machine or elsewhere): more meetings go via explicit arrangements. We worry about its impact on both the social atmosphere and scientific output.
- (4) Another worry is that people have to increasingly share their offices: this may discourage people from coming to their offices, especially if meeting rooms are scarce and hard to book.
- (5) Most seminars now happen in a hybrid fashion. However, for junior researchers being able to talk to senior colleagues over drinks or dinner is crucial. It should be understood that Zoom is a poor substitute for this.

*Recommendation:* This leads us to make the following recommendations:

- (1) It is crucial that the PhD council again starts organising some social activities. The PVC is happy to hear that its activities are increasing and a social committee is being set up. The PVC strongly encourages people to keep this initiative going.
- (2) There should be a clear preference for having seminars and supervision meetings in person and on location. Senior staff members should be encouraged to attend seminars in person and there should a preference for having speakers present in person as well.

- (3) There should be an ample supply of meeting rooms: they should be easy to book and both students and supervisors should be aware of how this is done.
- (4) We understand that people are setting up a buddy system where junior and senior PhD students are being matched. We think this is a very good idea and we fully support this initiative.

2.2. **Mental health.** We have to be clear that almost all PhD students we spoke to say they feel they get a lot of support from their supervisors and we certainly do not want to create the impression that the Institute did or is doing a bad job in dealing with mental health: that was not what we heard from the students we interviewed. But it can be quite difficult to be open about mental health with one’s supervisor, since it is connected to feelings of inadequacy and failure.

Our key recommendation would be to “normalise” talking about these issues. Rejection and difficulties coping with publication pressure are not unusual and students should not have the feeling that they are the only ones struggling with these issues. We believe it is important that the institute, the “buddies” and supervisors facilitate the conversation about these topics.

*Recommendation:* Concretely, this translates in the following recommendations:

- (1) Make supervisors aware of issues of mental health. Give them advise on how to help their students if they struggle with these issues and how to detect that they may be struggling. Make it clear that they are not asked to solve these, but make clear where help can be found.
- (2) Make rejection and dealing with (publication) pressure an explicit topic during one of the skills courses or at another point during the PhD.

2.3. **Supervision.** Overall students were positive to very positive about their supervisors. Nevertheless, we found two general issues.

First of all, we have seen PhD students with large supervision teams in which no one is really feeling a strong sense of responsibility for the student. We pride ourselves on our interdisciplinary research environment, and rightly so, and involving people with different kinds of expertise is certainly important. However, in a few cases we noticed that large supervision teams do not translate into a lot of support; indeed, students can feel fairly isolated as a result, especially when communication among the supervision team is fairly minimal.

Secondly, some issues came up with less experienced supervisors. They may not be aware of how the PhD programme is organised (for example, they may not be aware of the TSP and the pilot study in the first year). Another issue that came up is that starting supervisors may not realise that there needs to be a team of supervisors. If a PhD student or a supervisor discovers these things at a late date, this may cause stress to both.

Sometimes PhD students are unsure whether they are “on track”. In fact, some students said they would like to have a kind of “progress bar” where they can see how far they are from completing the PhD. Clearly, matters cannot be quantified so easily, but we believe that supervisors can alleviate some of the stress by being explicit about how they see the progress of the student; and by reassuring the student if they

believe they are doing well. On the other hand, if they expect a certain number of publications by the end of the PhD they should be clear about that as well.

This may be an issue with which junior supervisors struggle more than senior supervisors, because they may be unsure themselves how well the student is doing and how critical the situation is if the student is doing poorly. For that reason involving a senior supervisor in the supervision team is important: they would be able to better assess how well the student is doing. This would be helpful to the student and junior supervisor alike.

*Recommendation:* Concretely, this translates in the following recommendations:

- (1) We recommend that a lot of attention is being paid to a clear division of the tasks especially in the case of large supervision teams. In practice, it may work best if one supervisor carries the main responsibility for the student.
- (2) We are positive about the supervision lunch. Developing guidelines for starting supervisors would be very helpful.
- (3) Make sure that at least one person on the supervision team can confidently assess the progress of the student; and do not forget that one of the main jobs of the supervisor may be to tell the student that they are doing fine.

**2.4. Diversity.** Our PhD population is quite a diverse crowd and people should be careful not to assume that there is a “standard PhD student”. One remark we heard a few times is that the default assumption seems to be that a PhD student at the ILLC is employed by the Faculty of Science: that may be true for the majority of cases, but there is still a sizeable minority employed by the Faculty of Humanities. In addition, there are students who are mainly working at the CWI or at a company. We should remain mindful of the diversity of our student population.

*Recommendation:* Concretely, this translates in the following recommendation:

- (1) Make sure the composition of the PhD council is an adequate reflection of the diversity of our PhD population.

**2.5. TA allocation.** Despite the TA agreement forms, quite a few PhD students complain about the fact that they have to teach too much and that when they teach, they have time for little else. So this remains a point of concern.

*Recommendation:* Concretely, this translates in the following recommendations:

- (1) Ask PhD students on feedback on the TA agreement forms and how this has worked for them.
- (2) Pay special attention to the situation of PhD students in the Humanities. We recommend that the management of the PhD programme tries to get an overview of the situation there and guides PhD students and their supervisors in finding good teaching opportunities for them.
- (3) As a rule, new courses should be assigned to more experienced PhD students and old courses should be assigned to PhD students that have taught these previously.

**2.6. Academic skills courses.** Generally, PhD students are happy with the skills courses. Some would like to have these courses tailored more specifically to their own situation and would prefer some more flexibility concerning the timing (when and in

which year to take these courses), but we understand that that may be hard to achieve. However, for some special occasions (like a presentation at an important conference) individual training may be possible, but not many PhD students or supervisors seem to be aware of this.

*Recommendation:* Concretely, this translates in the following recommendations:

- (1) Inform supervisors and PhD student about the possibility of individual training for PhD students (such as presentation and language skills).

**2.7. Role of the PVC and questionnaire.** We end this report with some self-reflection. In principle, the PVC is there all year round to help PhD students with some of the issues they may be dealing with – however, we were not asked to do this frequently and partly this may be due to the fact that people are unaware that they can approach us.

Some PhD students found our questionnaire too long and too generic. While designing a special questionnaire for each individual case is of course impossible, it may be worthwhile to design a special questionnaire for PhD students who have (just) finished.

*Recommendation:* Concretely, this translates in the following recommendations:

- (1) Tell PhD students at an earlier stage about the PVC committee and what it does.
- (2) Consider developing a special questionnaire for PhD students who have finished.
- (3) Rephrase the question concerning relevance to society. We recommend rephrasing it along the following lines: Is the societal impact of your research important to you and do you feel that in your PhD trajectory sufficient attention is paid to the relevance of your research to society? If not, what would you like to see done differently?

Amsterdam, 14 January 2023

Benno van den Berg

on behalf of the PVC 2022