

ILLC PHD PROGRAMME EVALUATION 2024

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.

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 through an online questionnaire. The PVC questionnaire addresses a wide range 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 the PVC members. Candidates who are in their second year are invited by default. All of the topics listed above can be discussed in more detail during these meetings, or more, if the candidate so wishes.

Out of the 68 PhD candidates affiliated with the Institute, 52 were invited to fill in the questionnaire. The other 16 were not invited due to temporary inactivity or employment elsewhere. In addition, there were 13 PhD candidates affiliated with the ILLC who are employed by the CWI. The PVC does not monitor the quality of the PhD Program of the CWI, hence these students were not invited to complete the questionnaire. The committee received 44 completed questionnaires and interviewed 23 PhD candidates. This number includes all candidates in their second year, 16 in total, and another 7 candidates who were invited by the PVC based on their questionnaires. No candidate requested an interview. The interviews took place between April 16 and June 14, 2024 in person and online.

The PVC of 2024 initially consisted of Gregor Behnke (chair), Davide Beraldo, Franziska Jahnke, and Beste Kamali. Beraldo and Jahnke later stopped their service at the second round of interviews and after the drafting of this report, respectively, and Behnke and Kamali are concluding this report in January 2025.

Below, we present our main findings and recommendations based on the PhD questionnaires, subsequent interviews, and internal deliberations. 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 whole ILLC Community.

2. Findings and recommendations

Based on the responses to the questionnaire and our meetings with individual PhD candidates, the ILLC is a research environment of high quality for its PhD candidates. Most supervisors provide excellent support and supervision. The large majority of ILLC PhD candidates are happily and productively working on exciting research projects, guided by committed supervisors, enjoying supportive work environments. However, we found several individual cases where the interaction between supervisor and supervisee was subpar. In a similar vein, most of the ILLC's PhD candidates are at the heart of the ILLC's vibrant and intellectually creative research community, but some feel isolated. The rest of this report focuses on the experience of the PhD candidates who feel they are not (yet) in an ideal work and study environment.

The report and recommendations for this year can be grouped into 4 main themes including supervision, skills courses, work spaces, confidential contact point, which we discuss in detail below in order of salience as we perceive them in.

2.1. Supervision

Observations: A majority of PhD candidates are very satisfied with their supervisors and their overall work and research environment. Most supervisors at the ILLC provide supervision that meets or even substantially exceeds supervision standards. However, there are groups where these standards for supervision are not always met. Below we provide a list of recommendations based on the reports we have received from the PhD candidates relating to supervisory duties that they feel to be missing at times.

Recommendations:

1. The ILLC has a comprehensive code of practice on supervisory activities available on the ILLC website¹. Some of the recommendations we make below are already included there. We recommend that this document is made more visible and staff members are encouraged to consult it more actively and frequently. For example, a reminder may be communicated at the start of new projects to all involved staff members. Starting PhD candidates must be included in this communication so they can set realistic expectations and take action as needed in case the code is not being followed. Supervisors should be encouraged to actively discuss the code of practice with their PhD candidates.
We recommend a review of the code by the management team at suitable intervals, as it might become outdated. If it is concluded that a revision is needed, sending out a questionnaire tapping all of the permanent staff's opinion should spark increased attention to the code in addition to updating the quality standards in supervision.
2. We recommend that the supervisors (continue to) have regular weekly meetings with PhD candidates based on a clear schedule. Fewer meetings are acceptable if that is the candidate's wish. Similarly, PhD candidates should not be required to meet more than once a week with their supervisor, unless they desire this themselves. If the supervisor has the means to do so, it is recommended to tailor the meeting frequency to the PhD candidate's preference and needs.
3. Supervisors should provide feedback (e.g. on a paper draft, talks, applications) in a timely manner, which often means before the next weekly meeting. If this is not possible, this should be communicated to the PhD candidate at the earliest opportunity including a timeline on when feedback can be expected.
4. In case two supervisors of one PhD candidate assume a division of responsibilities, this should be done exhaustively covering all aspects of advising listed below, and the division should be communicated clearly to the candidate. Based on PhD candidate reports, the following three components of advice the the likeliest to fall through the cracks in case of less thorough division of responsibility among supervisors:
 - a. Feedback on written material

1

<https://phdprogramme.illc.uva.nl/Info-for-Supervisors/code/#Theroleandresponsibilitiesofthemainsupervisorare>:

- b. Advice on conference / publication venues
- c. Advice on career prospects

As the most time consuming of the three, we recommend that feedback on written material is clearly associated with a supervisor each time it is needed, both to create more accountability and to avoid overlaps. There are multiple ways of reaching this clarity. Supervision teams can share the responsibility based on topic, genre (paper vs. talk), stage of writing (early draft, later draft, revision) among other parameters.

5. Large groups with several PhD candidates should have an internal support structure. Having many PhD candidates cannot be an excuse for giving them little support. In case a group has more PhD candidates than the supervisor can effectively handle, the supervisor should create clear arrangements for supervision and feedback via PostDocs, associated staff members and co-supervisors, or senior PhD candidates.
6. Candidates frequently run into deadline issues leading to overworking before paper submission deadlines. In some cases, this is due to bad time management on the part of the supervisor - by responding late to requests for feedback, or requesting last minute changes. We recommend a more proactive approach in supervising around deadlines.
7. The Teaching and Supervision Plan (TSP) and the annual reviews provide texts and processes that greatly benefit the candidates by giving them clarity on their performance and expectations. Supervisors should make sure to clearly communicate their expectations and what candidates can expect from them in return when discussing the TSP. This should be done with due diligence.

2.2. Skills Courses

Observations: All PhD candidates are obliged to participate in a set of skills courses during their PhD, starting with “Managing your PhD”. The overall opinion of PhD candidates towards these courses is mixed. While some liked the courses and found them generally helpful (e.g. the presentation course), we saw several lines of recurring issues. A majority of the candidates raised the following as points of contention in their questionnaires and interviews.

- The overall sentiment is that skills courses frequently end up being unhelpful due to timing. Notably “Mastering your PhD”, while needed in the first year of study, is often only available to candidates in their second or third year due to lack of spots or scheduling conflicts of PhD candidates. The course is offered irregularly or getting a spot seems random. Course availability may overlap with teaching or conferences. When it is possible to take the course, it feels like a waste of time because the skill has already been acquired through studies.
- The organization of the skills courses is extremely strict, requiring the candidates to attend all meetings without exception. They have to miss that instalment of the course if they know they cannot attend all sessions. It is unreasonable to expect PhD candidates to commit to attend all sessions given conferences, submission deadlines, teaching obligations ...
- The writing course uses a bio-medical text. Although in principle helpful if taken at the right time, many ILLC candidates feel this is a lost opportunity, teaching only the very basics, and possibly too late in their studies. Several candidates even feel that the course is not helpful for them, as it focuses on aspects that are irrelevant for their research subject.

Recommendations: We believe that the ILLC should take steps to make these skills courses more effective and efficient and less of an obstacle. More precisely, we recommend:

1. Discussing with the FNWI ways to reduce ILLC PhD candidates' course load. We understand the CWI PhD candidates only need to take one skills course. The observations we include above may be used to demonstrate the numerous complaints with the current skills course offer and requirement.
2. If a structural change cannot be negotiated with the FNWI, we recommend that the current practice of exemption be generalized. For example, all candidates that have passed e.g. 18 or 24 months of their PhD could be exempted from the "Mastering your PhD" course. Another course of action could be granting a certain number of exemptions across the board, given the supervisor's approval.
3. PhD candidates should be made widely aware of the possibility of exemptions (along with any modifications in policy). Many candidates reported not knowing about this option and stressing out about fitting in all of the required skills courses despite conflicts, and simultaneously wasting their time on courses they no longer needed.
4. In addition to improvements in exemption policy and scheduling, alternative sources of satisfying a skills course requirement could be identified. For example, a certain level of writing accomplishment could satisfy the writing course. Courses from the Professional Skills Learning Trajectory, which primarily teach after-studies skills for possible careers, could be an independently interesting alternative.
5. Note that the skills courses are still considered helpful when taken at the right time. It should be discussed with the FNWI to improve the administration of the course "Mastering your PhD". The current haphazard scheduling and strict attendance requirement appears counterproductive. In terms of scheduling, PhD candidates must be able to take this course in their first year when it is most needed. Strict attendance should at least be replaced by missing one session by permission.
6. The ILLC should consider offering a more specialised writing course. This could be held online, or in-house, ideally separated by faculty (i.e. one course for the FNWI and one for the FwG candidates each tailored to the respective research topics).
7. Some candidates want to improve their teaching qualifications. Skills courses related to teaching (e.g. the ones from the TLC) should be given more visibility.

2.3. Desk policy and communications about it

Observations: We acknowledge that the ILLC is under substantial pressure when it comes to assigning workspaces to PhD candidates. Both we and the PhD candidates are aware that the current office situation is not sustainable, as there are more moves ahead. However, for candidates to come and work at the ILLC, which is necessary to maintain a healthy work environment for them as well as a vibrant atmosphere for the rest of us, candidates need work space in which they feel comfortable. We are not in a position to make recommendations on desk policy, but we do believe that the stress caused to the candidates by the workspace shortage can be reduced.

- There were cases in which it was unclear to candidates how and when they needed to move their workplace. In individual cases, ILLC management has informed candidates on an extremely short notice that they need to vacate their rooms.
- Information given to the PhD council about the introduction of the flex-desk policy was not disseminated to all PhD candidates early, nor by the ILLC management.

- For a substantial subset of candidates these situations cause anxiety and stress given that they don't know when and how their work environment will change.
- Several PhD candidates voiced unhappiness with some of the rooms, notably the big PhD room in LAB42 (commonly called the "fish tank"). This is evidenced by the low occupancy rate of the room.
- Some PhD candidates voiced concerns that the occupants of their rooms are too mixed in terms of topic (thus feeling isolated). They would prefer PhD candidates working on similar topics to share a room. This might, in the candidate's view, facilitate collaboration between the candidates.

Recommendations:

1. When the management is considering substantial changes to desk policy (e.g. flex desks instead of fixed ones), the plans and their consequences should be communicated to PhD candidates from a central source and in a timely manner.
2. On an individual basis, the decisions to move a candidate's workplace should be communicated openly and as early as possible. Candidates should be given at least two weeks of warning ahead of their workplace being relocated.
3. The ILLC's management might consider how the flex-desk policy affects the coherence of the research groups in terms of seating for candidates with similar research topics.

2.4. Confidential Contact Point(s)

Observations: Most of the time, no conflicts arise between candidates and their co-workers, but a comprehensive support structure needs to be in place whenever they do. This year, we observed a few instances of substantial conflicts between PhD candidates and their supervisors and problematic work environments. In some instances, PhD candidates were affected by conflicts between their supervisors. In some cases, they reported that supervisors were not meeting supervision standards. There was also one case of a supervisor behaving inappropriately towards a PhD candidate.

In multiple instances, such conflicts caused mental health issues for the involved PhD candidates. While these conflicts were typically below the threshold where the faculty's confidential advisor should be involved, they were often serious enough that they ought to have been resolved quickly. This, however, did not happen and longer and protracted conflicts emerged. When the faculty's confidential advisor was involved, this advisor seemed to be too far removed from the ILLC to make a difference. One candidate stated they wished they could speak to an institute-level contact, but was told that no confidential advisor exists at the institute level.

Recommendations: We believe there should be a way for PhD candidates to raise issues with/about their supervisors when they don't feel comfortable to do that themselves.

1. The overall procedure for obtaining help in these situations should be made more clear to PhD candidates. We would like to mention the most important items here.
 - a. Cases of inappropriate behaviour can be reported to the FNWI's confidential contact point who will then involve the ILLC if necessary.
 - b. Issues surrounding supervision can be discussed with the ILLC's director or with the management team in general.
 - c. Other issues can be discussed with the management team.

2. It seems that sometimes these contact points are perceived as too remote or “too official” for students to initiate communication. We recommend that the PVC’s role as a first-contact point is revived for PhD candidates to report issues. This contact point then can and must involve the appropriate people, based on the issue raised, while not attempting to solve the issue. This should not create a separate structure of confidential contact points, but supplement the existing structure so that it becomes easier for candidates to access the assistance they need. After discussion with the director of the ILLC’s PhD program, we note that:
 - a. The original purpose of the PVC was exactly to fill this role as a permanent group of staff members that PhD candidates can contact in case of conflicts.
 - b. The PVC at some point in the past stopped fulfilling this role.
 - c. Given willingness inside the current PVC, we recommend reviving this role (see Section 3 on proposed changes to the structure of the PVC)

2.5. Miscellaneous

Next to these major points of concern, numerous small issues have also been reported to us, which we summarize below.

1. Information on what to do and when to do things during **pregnancy** is lacking and not clearly presented. Current formulation on contract extension in case of pregnancy is too vague.

Recommendation: The ILLC should take effort to provide support information and material, including on parents’ rights, or provide directions to general resources (e.g. Medewerkers A-Z). Important information to be included for employees is contract extensions. Non-employed candidates should be informed to discuss their particular situation with the management.
2. PhD candidates are often not aware of the rules for **travel reimbursement**. I.e. which items can be reimbursed? Is there a cap for hotels, food, flights? How much money is there for me to spend this year?

Additionally, there were cases where the person responsible for the budget delayed the payout of the reimbursement significantly, leaving the candidate out of pocket for 4-digit amounts over prolonged periods.

Recommendation: Create a document outlining the rough rules. Add an item to the promovendi page listing the WBS element that PhDs can take their travel money from. They often don’t know this number, but have to, for booking flights and reimbursements. The information provided should reference the related documentation in the ILLC wiki (https://wiki.illc.uva.nl/wiki/Travel_budgets).
3. The **Promovendi web page** sometimes sends emails on tasks that are already completed (e.g. Skills courses). The website also lists deadlines for the Skills courses. But those are not actually hard deadlines. This is not clear to candidates.

Recommendation: create clarity here.
4. In some cases, no supervisor of a PhD candidate is **present on-site** for long periods.

Recommendation: we strongly recommend that one PhD (co-)supervisor must physically be present at the ILLC regularly. The PhD program should make sure that this is the case from day one on.
5. Before teaching, not all lecturers create **TA agreements** with PhD candidates teaching with them. The necessity of these agreements is not enforced.

Recommendation: Introduce a “no TA agreement, no teaching” rule and inform PhD candidates. I.e. if there is no TA agreement, there should be no obligation to teach.

6. **TA allocation** happens only once a year. It is unclear what happens to PhD candidates that join during the year and are too late to participate in TA allocation.

Recommendation: Set up a procedure and information on the website/wiki for this.

7. PhD candidates need more informal opportunities to **socialize** with each other and notably to PhD candidates from other groups.

Recommendation: Encourage having lunch with a different colleague every month by providing a “mixed lunch ticket”.

8. Some PhD candidates experience **publication pressure** or have problems when dealing with rejections.

Recommendation: Have either a contact point (as said, this could be the PVC) or a course/seminar to help candidates cope.

9. **CSC** scholars voice unhappiness with their financial situation. They have to worry about the basics of living, while they should be able to concentrate mainly on their PhD. Further, there seems to be unclarity about the top-up that FNWI and FGW are paying. Candidates don't know that it is the same amount and feel they are missing out on a top-up that other candidates are getting.

Recommendation: Create clarity here.

3. Organization of the PVC

The PVC is an integral part of the ILLC's PhD program. We believe that we help and play an important role in keeping up the high standards of quality of the ILLC's PhD program. While we were able to fulfil our role this year, we feel that the organisation of the PVC as it currently stands can be improved.

Recommendations:

- Have 2 year staggered terms - this way we guarantee that 2 old members already have experience in conducting interviews and reporting while 2 new members are trained. This way, the experience inside the PVC is not lost.
- Require that at least half of the PVC has supervised or are currently supervising PhD candidates at the ILLC, so that PVC members are aware of the procedural aspects of the ILLC's PhD program.
- If there is agreement to revive a first-contact role (see 2.4), make it clear that this is a role requiring an “open door” for PhD candidates year round.
- Recruit new PVC members by sparking interest and inviting applications at the appropriate seasonal instalment of the Current Affairs Meeting.

4. Conclusion

We are very happy to see that PhD candidates mostly enjoy a healthy and productive work environment at the ILLC with the exceptions reported above. While being aware that many of these issues are essentially out of our control, or may be perceived as business as usual, we do strongly believe that we can make small changes that can lead to large improvements in the candidates' professional life and well-being. We hope that our report informs and inspires ILLC members to make those small changes.