

PVC Report 2009

Institute for Logic, Language and Computation
University of Amsterdam

Introduction

The *promotievoortgangscommissie* (PVC) conducts yearly interviews with the PhD students of the ILLC as a means of monitoring and, wherever possible, improving the quality of the working environment the institute can provide. The 12th (!) installment of the PVC took place in the week of 2–6 November 2009, with a small number of additional interviews being held in the weeks after that. Over the years, a lot of different people have served on the PVC on one or more occasions: Maria Aloni, Peter Blok, Reinhard Blutner, Rens Bod, Paul Dekker, Ulle Endriss, Theo Janssen, Dick de Jongh, Jaap Kamps, Tanja Kassenaar, Michiel van Lambalgen, Ingrid van Loon, Peter van Ormondt, Khalil Sima'an, Leen Torenvliet, Marjan Veldhuisen, and Yde Venema. This year, the PVC consisted of Ingrid, Maria, Peter (vO), Paul, Rens, Tanja, Theo, and Ulle.

We have spoken to most of the PhD students at the ILLC, 31 in total,¹ for about half an hour each. We have discussed the (organisational aspects of) their research, the supervision they receive, the extent to which they have written publications and presented talks, the courses they have taken (both scientific and nonscientific courses, e.g., on presentation skills, academic writing, or career planning), their involvement in teaching, their organisational activities, their scientific and social contacts within the ILLC and the outside world, the extent to which they are informed about matters at the ILLC, the legal and practical aspects of their appointment, their plans for the future, and their wishes and complaints.

In the sequel, we first summarise our findings and then formulate a number of specific recommendations, mostly directed at the Scientific Director of the ILLC, but also at the supervisors and at our PhD student population.

Findings

The first and most important finding is that the PhD projects carried out at the ILLC continue to be of very **high quality**. This is due, first and foremost, to the high quality of

¹There currently are 43 PhD projects running at the ILLC. Four PhD students are based at the CWI (we always assume that they are taken good care of over there and do not invite CWI students to the interviews). Several others were residing abroad or did not need to attend as they were about to defend their PhD. Two further interviews are planned for the coming weeks with students who were abroad in November.

our students, but also, as the PVC interviews confirm, to the high quality of the **supervision** they receive. There certainly are a number of smaller, and very occasionally larger, problems that individual students and their supervisors face, but overall our PhD student population is very satisfied with the supervision of their PhD projects. In some cases the PVC suggested that it may be a good idea to appoint a second supervisor; in other cases the PVC noted that choosing a formal *promotor* should not be left until too late.

We were pleased to see that the majority of PhD students and their supervisors now put together an **OBP** (*opleidings- en begeleidingsplan*) during the first few months of the student's appointment. Experience shows that this avoids a number of common problems, in particular when the OBP is not treated as a mere formality, but rather lays out a research plan for the first year in some detail and clearly states what kind of progress is expected from the student at the time their initial contract needs to be extended to the full period. The PVC therefore encourages all supervisors to make sure a detailed OBP is produced early on.

By now, a large number of our PhD students are on **three-year contracts**. At the moment there are two types of three-year contracts at the ILLC: those administered by the Faculty of Humanities and those financed from European projects (such as GLoRiClass). Many of the students concerned face or expect to face serious difficulties in completing their PhD on time. The PVC very much sympathises with these students. Indeed, we strongly believe that three years are not enough time for a PhD (and, to the best of our knowledge, this view is shared by all senior scientists working at the ILLC). Besides writing a PhD thesis, a successful PhD graduate will also have published several papers (not all of them on the thesis topic), will have been involved with teaching on more than one occasion, and will have engaged in a number of smaller or more substantial organisational activities by the time they finish. Achieving all of this in just three years is difficult (if not impossible).

A number of PhD students are worried about what will happen if they do not finish their PhD by the **end of their appointment**. The PVC notes that it would be good to have more information available on this matter. We were able to advise individual students that there are sometimes part-time teaching opportunities available at the ILLC or elsewhere; that they are often eligible for a few months' worth of unemployment benefits; and that it is not unheard of to start a postdoc position elsewhere while completing the writing-up. None of these are ideal scenarios, but they can sometimes point to a way out.

A number of students brought up the topic of **PhD student representation**. At the moment, there is no formal representation of PhD students in the institute. The PVC agrees that this should change and understands that the ILLC Management is also sympathetic towards the idea.

The **move to the Science Park** has affected PhD students both positively and negatively. On the positive side, several students (of those who did move) remark that they like the

fact that a larger proportion of the ILLC is now located in the same place. At the same time, several students who stayed behind in the Philosophy Department remark that they feel (even) more isolated from the ILLC at large than before.

From a practical point of view, there are a number of clear negative points associated with the move: As is well known, there is a very serious problem with **noise** pollution at the Science Park. The **lack of privacy** for those working in the open office environments has also been criticised by several students. A smaller number of PhD students have mentioned additional problems, such as the temperature (some parts of the building are too cold) and the lack of control over lightening and the blinds. Taken together, these are serious problems that have a strong negative impact on the working environment the ILLC can provide. A number of students (particularly from the LoLa group) choose to work mostly from home for these reasons, which the PVC believes to be a very regrettable development.

To counter some of the noise-related problems, several PhD students have brought up the idea that it may be helpful to agree on a **code of conduct** in the open office areas. For example, it seems reasonable to avoid taking private phone calls while in the area; to not have meetings in the area; to make sure any music you choose to listen to is really inaudible to everybody else; and to not leave your mobile behind when you leave your desk. The PVC agrees that this is a very good idea indeed.²

A recurring topic at the PVC interviews is the **teaching load**. The PVC notes that some PhD students teach a lot more than others and that it would be desirable to distribute the workload more fairly (the PVC also acknowledges that this will be difficult to achieve in practice). While there have been fewer complaints about excessive teaching load this year than in the past, this still is a problem for some individuals. The PVC also notes that the rules regarding teaching duties are not widely known amongst PhD students; indeed, the ILLC policy on the matter does not seem to be spelled out clearly anywhere.³

The offering of **nonscientific courses** that teach transferable skills (e.g., academic writing, presentation skills, applying for funding, didactics) continues to be received somewhat skeptically by PhD students. Admittedly, some of these courses are not great, but for others we have received very positive feedback from students who attended them. In particular, a course on presentation skills run exclusively for ILLC students has been well received in the past. It is unfortunate that the general reputation seems to be largely based on the negative examples. The PVC believes that nonscientific courses form a small but important part of the PhD training the institute should provide.

²The *blame* for the problem clearly resides with the former FNWI Management who decided to build this kind of building, but the *solution* to the problem is partly in our own hands.

³Our own, unofficial, interpretation of the rules is that, as a rough guideline, any PhD student on a standard four-year contract at the ILLC should spend up to 20% of their time on teaching and other organisational and administrative duties (more during the second and third year, less at the beginning and the end).

Scientific and social **contacts** within the institute are generally good. Still, a number of PhD students are concerned that there is not enough exchange of ideas between the different groups. This worry is uttered by students who identify themselves as philosophers more often than by others. The PVC recognises that there is (always) a certain danger of fragmentation, but also feels that the overall situation is not worse (nor better) than it has been in the past. It is important that people, including PhD students, continue to seek and improve contacts across groups. In this respect, one very helpful student-run activity, which is currently dormant but that we always liked very much, is the *PhD Lunch* that used to get organised at the Philosophy Department. Related to this, we are pleased to note that the **Logic Tea**, the ILLC's seminar series run for and by our PhD and Master's students, appears to be enjoying a phase of very good attendance. We always encourage PhD students to attend the Logic Tea and to volunteer to give a talk. This is particularly important for those who feel that their own research interests are currently underrepresented at the ILLC.⁴ The PVC also supports the recent call to all PhD students to make sure they have informative personal websites, so that others can find out what they are doing.

The OzSL, the **national research school** for logic, continues to be inactive. In fact, most PhD students now working at the ILLC have never had any contact with one of the national research schools. A small number of students are affiliated with the SIKS research school and perceive this as useful, but there appears to be no national research school that could serve the interests of a majority of our students. By now, at least one generation of PhD students have completed their programme very successfully without an active research school, so the PVC will not repeat its call from previous years to revive the OzSL or to join another school. We seem to be doing fine without. Individual supervisors should feel free, however, to have their students join a fitting research school.

Another agenda point at every PVC interview is the **information** that PhD students receive. As far as information regarding scientific events and similar activities go, the provision of information supplied by the ILLC receives excellent marks from our PhD students. The weekly ILLC Newsletter is widely read, and almost all PhD students know that they can (and should!) contribute news items themselves via the ILLC website. On the other hand, information regarding administrative processes and various practical bits and pieces of information is currently not well organised. A simple example, cited by one PhD student, is that many students are not aware of the procedure for arranging travel insurance for business trips. Another example is the fact that not everyone is aware of the fact that they can ask for a different kind of computer than the one they receive by default (a PC running Linux or Windows, or a Mac). The PVC also notes that the organisational structure of the ILLC and

⁴An interesting observation is the fact that each year we find that a large number of PhD students tend to think of themselves as “the only one doing X ”, while “almost everybody else is doing Y ” (for different values of X and Y). Of course, it does not take a logician to realise that they can't all be right.

the procedures by which important decisions in the institute are made are not as transparent and as widely understood as would be desirable.

There have been fewer complaints about **ICT support** than in previous years. The PVC is unsure whether this is a reflection of any actual improvement or rather a sign of resignation.

We conclude with a number of **miscellaneous** points brought up by individual PhD students that we feel are worth airing here: (1) It is regrettable that Sorbon has a monopoly on catering at the UvA; one aspect that concerns PhD students in particular is the fact that at the end of your PhD defense you are, for all practical purposes, forced to purchase an arguably over-priced reception package from them. (2) There have been some unfortunate problems and delays in finding appropriate facilities for housing the high-performance computers of the LaCo group at the Science Park. (3) It would be nice to have a whiteboard (or similar) in the common room. The PVC agrees with all of these points.

Recommendations

Here are our recommendations to the Scientific Director of the ILLC, as well as to the ILLC supervisors and the PhD student population at our institute, based both on the input received from the PhD students and on our own assessment:

- (1) Noise is a serious problem in the Science Park. Even if it will not succeed in the short term, the ILLC should push for converting the open spaces into offices with walls. In the short term, PhD students should request additional dividers and other furniture items that can improve their space. If there are free desks available that seem more attractive, then PhD students should not be shy to ask to change desk. PhD students should initiate a discussion on a possible *code of conduct* and all ILLC members should strive to adhere to it once a consensus has been found.
- (2) Three years are too short for a PhD. We recommend that the ILLC push for four-year PhD contracts whenever possible. This means lobbying in the Faculty for Humanities to return to four-year contracts (in fact, this appears to be happening already). For European projects, this means budgeting appropriately so that the institute can put money aside to finance a fourth year after the project has finished (wherever the funding instrument allows for this; it is not always possible). As a last resort, the ILLC should offer teaching contracts to supplement three-year appointments whenever possible. For all three-year appointments, we urge supervisors to devise well-defined projects and to closely match them to the background of the incoming PhD students.

- (3) The PhD student population of the ILLC needs formal representation. We suggest that the PhD students elect a PhD student council as soon as possible. We recommend that the ILLC Management consult with the elected representatives on a regular basis. We also recommend that the PhD student council be furnished with an appropriate budget to allow them to finance their activities.
- (4) Exchange between the different research groups at the institute is crucial for the long term success of *Project ILLC*. We encourage all PhD students to actively seek contacts outside their own group, to attend the Logic Tea and to volunteer talks (especially students with a “Humanities background”), to attend the DIP Colloquium (especially students with a “Science background”), and to participate in other events.
- (5) Teaching by PhD students needs to be organised appropriately. The director should clarify the ILLC policy regarding teaching and administrative duties for PhD students. To the extent possible, the director should seek to fairly distribute the teaching and administrative load across PhD students. Individual PhD students who feel that they are teaching too much should not hesitate to bring this point up with their supervisor.
- (6) To receive appropriate training on transferable skills is important for PhD students. We recommend that the ILLC take a more active role in providing such training, for instance by running presentation courses in-house (with outside, but suitably vetted, trainers). PhD students are strongly encouraged to make more use of the existing opportunities and to share both negative and positive experiences.
- (7) The provision of information regarding practical matters at the ILLC needs to be improved. We recommend that the ILLC seek to implement the planned *Intranet* at the earliest opportunity.

Amsterdam, 3 December 2009
on behalf of the PVC 2009
Ulle Endriss