

PVC Report 2010

Institute for Logic, Language and Computation-University of Amsterdam

1. Introduction

The *promotievoortgangcommissie* (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 13th instalment of the PVC took place in the week of 8–12 November 2010, with a small number of additional interviews being held in the weeks after that. This year, the PVC consisted of Maria Aloni, Henkjan Honing, Ulle Endriss, Yde Venema, Ingrid van Loon and Tanja Kassenaar.

We have spoken to most of the PhD students at the ILLC, 25¹ in total, for about half an hour each. We have discussed the (organizational 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 non-scientific courses, e.g., on presentation skills, academic writing, or career planning), their involvement in teaching, their organizational 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.

2. Findings & Recommendations

In general the PhD students are happy with the supervision and facilities they receive. There are a number of smaller –and a few bigger- problems with regards to supervision and facilities, where the latter mainly has to do with the working conditions at the Science Park building. In the paragraphs below we summarise our findings and recommendations.

2.1 Procedures

2.1.1 OBP, annual talks

As last year 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. Almost all PhD students have annual talks with their supervisor.

¹ There currently are 31 PhD projects running at the ILLC. Four PhD students are based at the CWI (we assume that they are taken good care of at that research institute and do not invite these PhD-students to the interviews). Two others were residing abroad at the time of the interviews.

Recommendation 1

The PVC encourages all supervisors to make sure a detailed OBP is produced at the end of the first year at the latest. When there are major changes in planning, a formal revision of the OBP is necessary.

2.2.2 Admission to the Doctorate

In some cases the request for admission to the doctorate is being done in a very late stage. PhD students can start with this procedure as soon as the promotor is known.

Recommendation 2

The advice of the PVC is to start arranging the formal procedure of admission to the doctorate as soon as possible after or even before the starting date

2.2.3 Exemption procedure

In order to enter a PhD programme at the UvA, international candidates must prove that their foreign academic degree is equivalent to the Dutch final university examination, or Master's degree. Arranging this exemption was an issue in almost all PVC talks so far. However, this is the first year that everything seems to be arranged in an early stage.

2.3 Information

The Support and Information pages <http://www.ilc.uva.nl/SupportandInfo/> that were setup after the 2009 PVC talks are received very positively. Still there were some comments on the setup of the pages and also some subjects were mentioned that were still unclear (see for example under 2.3.1).

2.3.1 How to get an extension?

As some PhD students at ILLC get an extension because of illness or teaching activities or simply because their supervisor has some own funds to pay it from, the PhD students wonder what ILLC's policy is. They would like to have more clarity on this issue. Especially for PhD students on a three year's contract this is an important issue. They are in a difficult position as they do not have the time for activities like teaching, organization of workshops etc., while at the same time these are good activities for their CV.

Recommendation 3

The PVC finds that an extension is never common, it is an exceptional thing and therefore needs a tailor-made decision. In some cases however, the ILLC should always give an extension and that it is in case of illness, and also when the PhD student spends significantly more time on teaching than 20%. In case of illness the PhD student should get an extension equivalent to the period and percentage of illness as is registered by the UvA (*bedrijfsarts*). Concerning teaching the ILLC should, together with the PhD council, coordinate and monitor the teaching activities of the PhD students in order to prevent a too big teaching load. If it does happen after all, the PhD student should get an extension equivalent to the time he or she spent teaching on top of the 20%.

The PVC understand that the ILLC cannot prevent supervisors to use their own funds for an extension but asks them to do this only when it is really necessary.

Recommendation 4 (repeated from last year)

Concerning three years contracts the PVC likes to repeat her recommendation of last year: 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 (for NWO applications it is already possible to apply for a four-year position). 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.

2.3.2 ILLC News/Conference mailing/ILLC current affairs

The ILLC newsletters are broadly known and read well. Not everybody seems to be aware that there are three different mailings:

- ILLC News with news&events at ILLC, information about funding possibilities, job openings (sent every week Monday afternoon)
- ILLC Conference Mailing with national and international events interesting for the ILLC community; sent every first day of the month
- ILLC Current affairs with administrative information, sent when a Programme Leaders Meeting (PLM) has taken place (approx once every two months)

2.4 Contacts

2.4.1. PhD council

The PhD council, set up after the 2009 PVC talks, has become an important player at ILLC, both as intermediate between ILLC's management and the PhD students, and as a body that unifies ILLC's PhD students. Most PhD students are very positive about the role of the PhD council.

Recommendation 5

The PVC applauds the PhD council initiative. It should definitely be continued

2.4.2. Presence at the Science Park

The PVC notices that a considerable number of PhD students only rarely come to Science Park to work. Reasons are not always clear but some of the PhD students cannot adjust themselves to the working environment at the Science Park and prefer to work at the library, the pub or at home. Supervisors do not seem to mind. For a limited number the open workplaces and the related noise problems are a real obstacle.

Also it is the impression, and a worry, of the PVC that especially the Logic&Language PhD students are less frequently here than PhD students from other programmes.

Recommendation 6

Although one cannot force PhD students (and PhD students are not simply bank employees) the PVC thinks it should stay common practice that PhD students are present a considerably amount of their time at the ILLC in the SP building. It is very important for the research and the research institute as a whole that the PhD students have a place where they can meet scientifically and socially. It is the opinion of the PVC that supervisors should play an active role in stimulating the PhD students to be at SP more often.

2.5 'Other' activities

2.5.1. Refereeing

It seems that only very few PhD students have some experience with refereeing. When asked for the reason the usual answer was that nobody asked them to do it.

Recommendation 7

As it is important for the PhD student's CV, the PVC advices supervisors to promote the involvement of PhD students in refereeing activities

2.5.2. Non scientific courses

We repeat what we wrote last year: the offering of non-scientific courses that teach transferable skills (e.g., academic writing, presentation skills, applying for funding, didactics) continues be received somewhat sceptically 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. Also, this year the FGW offered a well evaluated training for VENI and Rubicon applicants. It is unfortunate that the general reputation seems to be largely based on the negative examples.

Recommendation 8

The PVC believes that non-scientific courses form a small but important part of the PhD training a research institute should provide. Announcements of these courses should be sent to both PhD students and their supervisors. The ILLC should continue to organize internal tailor-made courses if necessary. The ILLC office could have a look if the VENI/Rubicon training could also be offered to FNWI PhD students.

2.5.3. Long-term stay abroad

Very few PhD students consider spending some time (couple of months) abroad. Of course, money could be the issue here, but also PhD students seem to think it's not a common thing to do.

Recommendation 9

The ILLC and the supervisors should make clear that spending some time abroad is often a valuable activity for the PhD student. A section about this could be added in the annual talks. When applying for external funds it is often possible to ask for extra money to make this possible. If the PhD student is not on an external funded project it is advised to actively seek for money.

2.5.4. Time spent on non scientific activities

The PVC likes to repeat here what is also written at the Support&Info pages at www.illc.uva.nl:
The teaching component for PhD students on a regular 4-years position is 20%. This percentage includes both teaching and organizational activities (organizing a workshop, editorship ILLC Magazine). For PhD students on a 3-years position and PhD students without employment teaching is allowed and recommended but not obligatory.

2.6 Miscellaneous

2.6.1. The future

Although most of the PhD students have thoughts about the future, it looks that they postpone action to the final stage of their PhD project. The difficulty is that in that stage the PhD students also have to finish writing up their dissertation.

Recommendation 10

PhD students are advised to start taking action in the third year (or second year for students on a three year's contract) if they plan to continue a career in research, especially in cases where one has to apply for external funds. It should be noted that decision processes at the EU and NWO committees easily takes up to half a year or more. The PVC advises to add a section on this in the forms for the annual talk of the third/second year.

2.6.2. Noise ongoing problem

There are still a number of complaints about noise in the SP building. For some PhD students the noise pilot in C3.119 really helped; for one PhD student it even got a little worse.

Recommendation 11

With regard to the noise in SP, the PVC realizes that already much has been done to solve this problem (including tapestry in the corridors, different setup of the room, special closed room for telephone calls and meetings) and there are no chances of having closed offices for the PhD students, it is recommended that both PhD students and passers-by stay concerned with each others work environment. For discussions and telephone calls, the PhD students should make use of C3.121, one of the meeting rooms C3.108 or C3.110, or the common room.

2.6.3. Promotor not known

The PVC is worried that the promotor is not known in all cases, in some cases not even in the final year.

Recommendation 12

The PVC members agree that the Dutch system, where only full professors have *promotierecht* (formal right of giving the doctoral degree to the student) has many drawbacks. They also agree that the PhD students should never become the victim of this system. Therefore it is the advice of the PVC that in the third year (or second year for students on a three year's contract) at the latest, but preferably earlier, the *promotor* should be known to the PhD student. The PVC advises that, if

the situation asks for this, the ILLC should have a full professor that acts as a pro forma *promotor*. This person could be ILLC's director.

2.6.4. Follow up activities

The PVC notices that there are much less follow-up activities for the ILLC Office than in earlier PVC rounds. Possible explanations:

- the fact that there is a PhD council and that the PhD students are represented in the programme leaders meetings results in better communication and a early signalling of problems
- due to the new building there are less problems with malfunctioning furniture, windows, keys etc.
- and of course we hope that the activities of the ILLC Office with regards to procedures, and the newly developed Support&Inf pages also play a role here.