

PVC Report 2011

Institute for Logic, Language and Computation-University of Amsterdam

1 Introduction

The *promotievoortgangcommissie* (PVC) conducts annual 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 14th session of the PVC took place in the week of November 28, 2011. All PhD students, except those based at the CWI¹, were invited, including the ones who had just started and the ones who had just graduated or were about to graduate, as the experiences of both groups would be of interest to the PVC. Besides three PhD students who notified the PVC that they were not able to be present, eight students didn't show up at the scheduled time. On top of that five meetings had to be cancelled because one of the PVC members fell ill. Therefore a second series of meetings had to be scheduled in the week of February 6, 2012.

This year, the PVC consisted of Maria Aloni, Reinhard Blutner, Alessandra Palmigiano, Jenny Batson and Tanja Kassenaar.

We met with most of the PhD students at the ILLC, 27 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, the PhD Council and at each individual PhD student.

2 Findings

In general the PhD students are happy with the supervision and facilities they receive. The general feeling towards the ILLC as an educational and research environment is very positive.

There are a few bigger problems with regards to the structure of the PhD research period, preparation for a future career and the cooperation between the different research groups within the ILLC. Among the members of the PVC this year there was discussion about the effectiveness of the process by means of which the PVC committee gathers information from the PhD students. Beside these larger issues, there were several smaller and/or more individual problems. In the paragraphs below we address the bigger problems. All other findings can be found in the appendix to this report. In chapter 3 the recommendations of the PVC are given.

¹ We assume that PhD students based at the CWI are taken good care of at that research institute and we therefore do not invite these PhD-students to the interviews.

2.1 More structure in the first year

It appears that PhD students, whether appointed on a specific project, on an open position on their own project, or admitted to the Graduate Programme in Logic, are not fully aware of what is expected from them and what they may expect from their supervisor or the ILLC. Especially in the first year this may cause some confusion and even delay or a lack of satisfaction. Some feel themselves drifting.

Some examples:

- it may be beneficial to have a second supervisor, for example, for students who want to do a more interdisciplinary project, or to prevent or solve problems between one supervisor and the student;
- must the second supervisor be an ILLC member?
- when is the definitive project proposal due? How much time is there to explore the options?
- how far may one deviate from the initial project proposal?
- what is the influence of the student resp. the supervisor on the decision regarding the topic?
- taking courses from the MSc Logic, or from somewhere else, visit a summer school, organizing a research project for MoL students can all help to get acquainted to the field and find a research topic they can get enthusiastic about more quickly;
- what is the relation of all this with the OBP and the first progress reports at 9 or 10 months?

Although it is the task of the supervisor to address these issues together with the student, it is clear that not all supervisors do, and not all PhD students feel comfortable about asking.

2.2 Better preparation for a future career

Several students who were going to graduate soon after the PVC meetings or who had already graduated were not happy with the way they were prepared for a future career.

Some supervisors do a lot for their students in this respect, in terms of advice, help with writing proposals and introductions to researchers in the field, at least when the student in question wants to pursue a career in academia. Other supervisors don't do this as much and then students feel they were not prepared and guided and end up missing valuable experience to put on their cv in order to successfully apply to open positions etc.

While there are not enough options for all PhD students to continue doing research, some students feel the education offered by the ILLC is focused mainly on preparation for work in research. There is little specific support for students, who want to pursue a career outside of academia. Others feel this cannot be expected of a research institute.

Some students find the career course offered by the UvA helpful in this respect. Others find it inadequate and insufficient. They would for example like to see that the ILLC would offer help to create contacts with suitable companies or organize internships at these companies. Or they would like the ILLC to encourage students to attend career events, by providing information on the website. Beside the advice they get about the importance of publications, presentation, reviews and international visits, students should also be advised that doing voluntary work and having hobbies is

also good for their cv, as is experience with working in a team, especially when applying for jobs in the business world.

Many students found the “Life-after-ILLC” event very useful and interesting and hope this will be organized annually. One student suggested setting up a network of colleagues who could help create opportunities for PhD students moving on (maybe with the help of Bureau Kennistransfer). Several students requested that more information be given on the ILLC News and website regarding available postdoc positions, grant opportunities and competitions such as VENI and Rubicon. A course on writing proposals as was organized last year at the Faculty of Humanities by Kees Hengeveld was much appreciated.

2.3 More cooperation between the research groups of the ILLC

Several students told the PVC that before starting their PhD at the ILLC, they expected a really interdisciplinary community and ditto approach to different aspects of Logic. They were disappointed to find that the various research groups at the ILLC tend to work independently of each other. Many PhD students, post docs and even staff members are not aware of the research of other staff members, even when this could be of interest to their own work. The students tell that all staff at ILLC should be ideologically motivated to make clear to others what it is they are doing.

Some new students are in fact interested in a project that would cross the borders of various research areas within the ILLC, but, especially since they are new in the community, this would involve a big effort and be quite hard to pull off.

There were several suggestions for improvement:

- have more ILLC Colloquia and Current Affairs meetings; these were both perceived as positive in this respect;

- have something like a more or less obligatory Friday lunch for the whole of the ILLC during which everybody can comment on the progress they made, the results they had in the past week. Not everybody will have something to say every week, which makes it more sensible;

- start up a new forum where PhD students from all groups present their current work to each other.

2.4 Time optimization PVC

Due to the large number of students who cancelled or just did not show up, a discussion arose within the PVC about more time-effective ways of gathering information from the students.

As it is rather a time consuming matter for the members of the PVC the suggestion was made to limit the meetings to meetings only with those students of whom it came to our attention somehow, for example by reading the answers to the questionnaire, that there were problems. It was decided that we should ask the students how they felt about these meetings and their usefulness.

All students who were asked are pleased with annual PVC meetings, because it is the only objective and confidential place for complaints, worries and questions, individual and general, because the PVC gave useful information during the meetings and helped solve problems, big and small, general and individual. Moreover it is a good moment to list all activities of the past year. One student did not see one of his major individual complaints from previous PVC meetings handled.

2.5 Other

As said before, other comments given by the PhD students are mentioned in detail in the attachment. A few of these are summarized here:

- Non-scientific courses: there seems to be a rather negative attitude towards non-academic or skills courses, while students, especially towards the end or after graduation, find that they missed out on learning some important skills. And where the Faculty of Humanities has now organized this in a structured way (still to be evaluated) through the Graduate School of Humanities, at the Faculty of Science this seems to be rather ad hoc.
- the room at and surroundings of Science Park: though less than in the previous edition of the PVC, there are still some noise and privacy issues with the PhD room at Science Park, plus some comments on the environment inside and outside the building.
- the work of the PhD Council is much appreciated by most PhD students, like welcoming new students, assigning teaching duties and organizing several events.

3 Recommendations

In this chapter the PVC gives her recommendations on how to improve the problems mentioned above. The PVC felt there is not one recommendation per problem, but rather a set of recommendations that would help solve several aspects of different problems. Therefore this chapter is ordered by recommendation and not by problem.

3.1 Research School Logic

It is known to the PVC that the National Research School Logic (Onderzoeksschool Logica OZSL) has not been functioning well the past years and that the ILLC management is seriously considering to set up a new school within the ILLC itself.

The PVC strongly supports this idea and wants to stress the Importance of such a school.

A 'Graduate school in Logic' could contribute to a more structured PhD programme, which is more clear to new (and not so new) PhD students. It could organize more in-depth academic courses on top of the courses organized by the MSc Logic and maybe also include a programme of non-academic courses. It could help improve coherence within the PhD community (and even the whole ILLC) and stimulate cooperation between PhD students in different research areas, within the ILLC and maybe later, if successful, also outside the ILLC. And it could provide a platform for all kinds of events for and by PhD students, like the Life-after-ILLC event and regular meetings in which PhD students present their work among themselves (without supervisors present).

3.2 Structured programme of non-academic courses

Whether or not embedded in a 'Graduate School in Logic', the PVC recognizes the importance of a more structured programme of non-academic courses for the PhD students at the ILLC. When set up in a structured way, with a good selection of useful and good quality courses, this could be of great benefit for all PhD students at the ILLC. This could not only help them set up their research and perform well in all PhD related activities outside the research, but this could also better prepare them for a future career.

A structured programme should make sure all students are aware of and participating in these courses at a sensible time.

Such a programme should be set up in coordination with the Graduate School of Humanities, the Faculty of Science and the Career Advice Centre of the UvA.

3.3 PhD guide/document (on the website)

To make sure all PhD students at the ILLC know what is expected from them and what they may expect from the ILLC, the PVC recommends that a document be made in which the typical curriculum of a PhD student at the ILLC is described. In this document matters such as the following can be addressed:

the first year, the second supervisor, deviation from the initial project proposal, taking classes outside the UvA/Netherlands, important activities for your cv.

This document should be drawn up by a workgroup of representatives of supervisors/promoters and PhD students.

This document should be on the website of the ILLC, Support & Information pages, but could also be handed out to all supervisors and PhD students and after that to every new PhD arrival and to every first time supervisor.

Beside this document it is crucial that the international students receive their letter of appointment in English and all students are informed about their 'functieprofiel' right at the start of this appointment.

3.4 Regular ILLC event for exchanging work/plans/ideas

To improve the coherence and cooperation within the ILLC and between the various research groups, the PVC recommends to have a regularly (bi-weekly or monthly) organized event for staff, postdocs and PhD students of all parts of the ILLC. During these events all participants tell in about two minutes what they have done/achieved in the past period and what they are planning. This should have an informal character and the purpose is to create awareness of what everybody is doing and to stimulate cooperation that crosses over the boundaries of the research groups.

This meeting should be in addition to the 'Current-Affairs' meetings and the 'ILLC Colloquium', which are both greatly appreciated by the PhD students, exactly for this reason. PVC recommends that both these meetings will keep on being organized and perhaps even more frequently.

3.5 Annual "Life-after-ILLC" event

Whether or not embedded in a 'Graduate School in Logic' the PVC recommends that the 'Life-after-ILLC' event be organized every year and could even be extended in terms of content and professionalism, by adding speakers from for example the Career Advice Centre, companies or NWO.

3.6 Regular meetings exclusively for PhD students

The PVC recommends a new platform, apart from the Logic Tea, exclusively for PhD students, where they can present and discuss their work, getting feedback both on their work and their presentation skills., without the presence of supervisors, other staff members of the ILLC or MSc Logic students.

This could help gain self-confidence, organize their thoughts and be good for informal scientific contacts as well. This could be embedded in a 'Graduate School in Logic'.

3.7 One obligatory course for all new PhD students

The PVC suggests to consider the possibility of an obligatory course on Logic for all new PhD students of the ILLC, like the Logic, Language and Computation course in the MSc Logic, where presentations are given by representatives of all research groups at the ILLC.

3.8 (new) Role PVC

The PVC recommends that the PVC meetings will remain as they have been for over 10 years, an annual event to which all PhD students will be invited without a screening beforehand.

The PVC recommends that this committee be given an additional task throughout the year, in that its members will act as confidants to whom students can turn with questions, complaints, worries, problems etc. that they do not feel comfortable discussing with their supervisor.

The names of the PVC members (confidants) will be on the website (S&I pages). Every year with the new round of PVC meetings these confidants will change.