

PVC, Promotie Voortgangscommissie, 2013 Findings and Recommendations

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1 Introduction

Since 1998 the ILLC evaluates its status as a working environment for PhD students by means of the PVC (“Promotievoortgangscommissie”), a committee that conducts annual interviews with all of the ILLC PhD candidates. These interviews serve as means to monitor and improve the quality of the working environment that the institute can provide and aims both to solve individual bottlenecks whenever spotted, and establish an overview and possibly improvement of the quality of the whole institute.

The fifteenth evaluation was carried out in May 2013, by a committee consisting of Paul Dekker (chair), Marijn Koolen, Cheryl Moolhuijzen (secretary), Peter van Ormondt (support), Leen Torenvliet, and Henk Zeevat. The committee held ± 25 -minute interviews with 34 candidates, according to a fixed, but flexibly maintained, agenda of focal points. (See findings, below.) Despite some unfortunate illnesses, the organization went smoothly. As usual, notes were taken from the interviews, but these only serve as a basis for the general, anonymous, findings which you can find in this report.

The general impression resulting from the interviews was by and large positive. Almost all projects appear to be on schedule, they deliver solid results, the working environment, physically and academically, is considered very satisfactory, the candidates are generally satisfied with the supervision they receive, and the PVC found it hard to extract specific wishes and complaints. Two veteran members of the PVC, who also acted on the PVC in the early beginnings, noticed a substantial improvement of the PhD candidates’ situation over the years. This may be partly due to the professional interest of the ILLC—by means of, among others, the PVC—in their training and well-being, and of course this is also due to the overall quality of our PhD candidates.

In the next two sections we summarize the PVC’s findings, ordered according to the agenda for the individual meetings, and from these some recommendations are extracted, in section 3, for the benefit of the ILLC director and management board.

2 Findings

1. *Research.* Almost all candidates have their OBP in place, and are working timely and happily. The progress and results are very satisfactory in general. Candidates are also satisfied with the supervision they receive, but with one qualification. Several times we had to urge candidates to ask the supervisor for more active steering.

We believe that all supervisors are indeed capable and willing to provide actual supervision, but often they are simply too busy to always initiate these activities themselves. In this case we think it is fair if the candidates ask for, and get granted, more attention. For this to work out well, it is important, first, that the candidates themselves realize they can and have to ask for concrete supervision, and also, second, that they will get this upon request.

In quite a few cases it turned out expedient to have a second supervisor, and the PVC maintains that it should be general policy to have a first and a second one anyway (with distinguished roles, of course). In some cases three supervisors are active, and this seems at times to be asking for complications.

2. *Education.* Almost all candidates are able to find required education and training at the ILLC, or neighbouring institutes. Lacunas are there to be filled. An odd situation obtains for humanities candidates, in the fact that they have to earn official credits, but in order to get these registered it seems they have to enroll as a student. Hopefully this will be solved with the ILLC PhD program.

Quite a few candidates have had a heavy teaching load last year. Supervisors, and of course the candidates and the program director, should see to it that they are compensated for this the next years, but of course one should be cautious. It is also generally observed that the teaching load is heavily underrated, observing that often $< 25\%$ of the actually invested time gets credited. Of course this is part of a more general problem, but even more painful for the PhD-candidates. (Just calculate what one gets paid per hour) Surely, a ‘stiptheidsactie’ would be disastrous for all programs. We can only observe this problem here.

We received rather mixed, but mainly negative reactions about obligatory courses at GW. We heard some “nice” and “useful”, but we heard more “nonsense”, “incomprehensible” and “total waste of time”. As for the project planning and how to write course, they didn’t seem to be geared towards the needs of our PhD candidates. People also had problems signing up for the planning course: they were just ignored or rejected.

In view of future positions it may be useful for many PhD candidates to follow the BKO track (‘Basis-Kwalificatie Onderwijs’).

3. *Tasks.* Most candidates are active and involved in other activities than research and teaching only.

4. *Contacts.* Almost everybody is satisfied with his/her contacts. Sometimes these are hampered because the candidate's work is taking place at different or varying locations, but this is unavoidable. The general impression of the PVC is that many of the actual contacts are, naturally, organized group-wise in group-meetings, lunches, etc. Even so, the public activities serve a constitutive role in a feeling of ILLC identity.

Quite a few candidates don't attend the logic tea, because they feel it is too purely logic-oriented and the talks beyond the horizon of many. The PVC emphasizes towards both the organizers and potential speakers and candidates that the Logic Tea is **from** and **for** the students. The only way to adjust its focus is by attending the Tea and speaking there.

The PhD council is approved by all.

5. *Information.* Sometimes the news-supply seems to be over-specific, but this is of course no problem. Everybody is satisfied with it.

6. *Position.* Admission procedure is well-arranged, there are hardly any legal bottlenecks, but there is a harsh complaint about the UvA immigration office, that not only fails to provide information but also gives wrong information.

People are generally happy with the move from SP904 to SP107, despite some windows complaints. Many people actually prefer the new building.

Before the PVC interviews there had been the idea that (too) many candidates work at home, or at least not at the Science Park. The interviews shed a slightly paradoxical light on this issue. Almost everybody is almost always here at the SP on his/her SP days, but many people just notice that roommates, fortunately or unfortunately, often are not there. There were no complaints about the on-floor accessibility of staff members (surprisingly, perhaps).

7. *Future.* Most of the candidates want to stay in academia. Some would prefer more attention for career-planning, either in the form of a course, or by means of support from the supervisors. Sometimes it feels as if the supervisors only care about the completion of the PhD-thesis, and don't care about the follow-up. Career planning ought to be on the agenda of the candidates, their supervisors, and the supplementary programs, as supplied by the FGW and FNWI respectively.

8. *Wishes, complaints.*

- It is felt an inequality that some candidates get paid 100% for more than 100% work, while others (in GW) get paid 80% for actually the same amount of work. In general people feel uneasy anyway that there are so many differences in the position (rights and responsibilities) of PhD-candidates even those who share offices. This is partly due to the differences in the various appointments (by GW, Science, NWO, none), and

difficult to straighten out.

- There is also a vast difference in the demands of different supervisors. Some firmly insist on publications in the first year, some even encourage no dissemination of results until after a couple of years some major solid results have been established. The PVC does not think that it is any good to follow one line here. However, it should at least be clear what the expectations are. In some cases it has turned out a problem that it is unclear what the candidates commitments are especially in the first year. We have also sensed a more general concern about what is the status of the first year's evaluation, who is responsible for that, and what its consequences can be. The PVC thinks that the supervisor and the PhD candidate should make clear agreements at the start of the project about these matters, and also, that if anything is not formally agreed upon beforehand, the PhD candidate cannot afterwards be held responsible for that.
- Slightly related to this, some candidates felt the need for more substantial support in the first year, in orientation, research planning, formulation of research goals, and actually carrying out research. Some really felt at a loss, and didn't have a clue if they were doing well. Supervisors need to be more pro-actively attentive to these concerns.
- The term 'PhD student' is felt somewhat degrading, and 'PhD candidate' is argued for.
- Reinstall the reference library.
- There are too many activities. They are worthwhile, but simply too many to follow next to one's research and teaching.

3 Recommendations

1. The PVC persists in emphasizing the desirability of a second supervisor. It is neither sufficient nor necessary for a successful project, but it is important, surely for unforeseen occasions.
2. In general the OBP's deserve more critical attention in the sense that (a) they contain clear agreements about regular face-to-face supervision, (b) they contain a clear statement of the rights, responsibilities and expectations of the PhD candidates, most importantly of those in their first year. We want to emphasize that candidates cannot be held responsible for tasks not agreed upon. (Neither can their supervisors, of course.)
3. By all means, but as far as possible of course, establish uniformity in the position (numbers of years, teaching obligations, compensation for these) of all appointed PhD candidates.
4. Facilitate the BKO training for PhD candidates, by announcements and access on the ILLC website, and by acknowledging this training as a registered part of the (possibly 20%) teaching duty.

5. Somebody should take a solid, critical and constructive look at the (organization, contents, and execution of the) supplementary courses from Humanities and Science on the subjects of PhD management, academic skills, career planning, etc. One should see to it that they indeed serve their own purposes, as well as the practical and academic demands of our own students.
6. In order to facilitate the workings of the Logic Tea, it may be renamed to iLLiCIT, the Logic Language Computation Tea. (Thanks to Leen for eliciting the suggestion.)
7. The members of the PVC agree to figure as PVC ‘confidants’ on the ILLC website, until the next PVC gets installed. Candidates can turn to confidants with questions, complaints, worries, problems, etc., that they feel not comfortable to discuss with their supervisor.