

Promotie Voortgangscommissie, 2014

Findings and Recommendations

PVC-14
ILLC, Universiteit van Amsterdam

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Since 1998 the ILLC evaluates itself how well it functions as a working environment for its PhD candidates. The PVC (“Promotievoortgangscommissie”) is a committee that conducts annual interviews with all ILLC PhD candidates. These interviews serve, first, to establish an overview of the PhD situation in the ILLC in general, regarding formal, practical and academic matters; second, to see if the ILLC does well in providing an environment for the individual PhD projects to flourish and develop well; and, third, to suggest (and implement) improvements where they are needed or desirable.

The sixteenth evaluation was held in June 2014, by a committee consisting of Jenny Batson, Nick Bezhanishvili, Paul Dekker (chair), Raquel Fernández Rovira, Tanja Kassenaar, Peter van Ormondt and Henk Zeevat. The committee interviewed 38 candidates, according to a fixed, but flexibly maintained, agenda of focal points. The first and foremost impression from these interviews was, as usual, by and large positive. The projects appear to be on schedule, they deliver solid results, the working environment, socially, practically and academically, is considered satisfactory, no project faces serious bottlenecks, the candidates are satisfied with the supervision they receive, and the PVC found it hard to extract specific wishes and complaints.

In the first section we summarize the PVC’s findings in some more detail. These findings lead to a couple of recommendations which are presented in the second section.

1 Findings

1. Research and Supervision. The PVC was impressed by the work carried out by the candidates, the results obtained, numbers of papers presented and published, and plans to be realized. All candidates have their OBP in place, and in all cases these seem to be well-defined and feasible and (flexibly) observed.

Overall, candidates are quite satisfied with the supervision they receive. However, in some isolated cases supervisors do not seem to be able to combine well enough their supervision duties with their other academic activities and

obligations. This may result in deficiencies concerning the amount of time and attention dedicated to PhD candidates. We were also pleased to observe that some supervisors are particularly successful in combining the supervision of an impressive number of PhD candidates with their other activities.

Where supervision is not as regular and intense as required or desirable, our first recommendation is for the student to initiate action and try and make regular and substantial appointments with the supervisor. The problem is never unwillingness on behalf of the supervisor. If practical considerations prohibit improvement, we advise (and sometimes help) soliciting a second *active* supervisor. Such an option has often been considered, but it is surely not realized effectively enough. In general we recommend two supervisors anyway (see below), like the PVC has done in previous years.

We observed once again that the first year of the PhD projects is a period of special uncertainty for the PhD candidates. For quite a few candidates it remains unclear what are (and what are not) the rights and duties of the candidate and their supervisor, and also not what is actually, concretely, expected from them. The demands are actually quite diverse. Some supervisors insist on solid publications in the first year; in contrast, others even discourage publication until some major results have been established. It is good of course that each supervisor follows his/her own line, and surely the specific area of research dictates its own specific demands. Nevertheless, any expectations and requirements should be clear and agreed upon. Also the status of the first year's evaluation, its possible outcome and consequences, should be clear.

We have witnessed some cases of conditional extensions of a contract, and we think these are delicate and ought to be handled with the utmost care. For one thing, they are potentially extremely stressful, of course, and for some even frustrating in the most literal sense: they can block the capacity of sound and creative thinking. The PVC is of the opinion that a conditional extension should be avoided. However, if there is a valid reason that the requirements have not been met or have been abandoned, and the supervisor is convinced that the candidate is capable of complying with newly formulated and agreed requirements, the PVC thinks that it is fair that a conditional extension is given. However, the new requirements should be very clear, objective and realistic. Furthermore, the PVC is of the opinion that a conditional extension should only be given for one single period.

2. *Education (Given and Taken)*. Almost all candidates are able to find required education and training at the ILLC, or neighbouring institutes. Lacunas are there to be filled in, but none require institutional actions or changes.

Almost all candidates are involved in teaching, most of them as TAs. The time they are required to invest, or feel they are required to invest, differs immensely, ranging from four hours a week to full-time. There is nothing that the PVC can do about this, besides recommending the candidates themselves

to ring a bell when teaching starts to consume too much of their time. There are clear regulations on the upper bound of time candidates spend on teaching. A substantial part of the teaching assistance consists in grading assignments, and we recommend the candidates, whenever possible, to also get involved in the instruction itself, since this serves one's experience. Related to this point several candidates expressed a need for a practical teaching course. We did not explicitly bring it up in the interviews this year, but it is also worthwhile for candidates, if possible, to qualify for the BKO ("Basis Kwalificatie Onderwijs").

We received mixed reactions on the obligatory non-academic skills courses. The project management course was considered useless, waste of time, and not applicable to the candidates' practice. The presentation skills course was generally evaluated positively, although several criticisms came up indicating that there is room for improvement. Several candidates found the course too long, the working group too large, and the feedback too general and disconnected from the content of the presentations.

3. Cooperation (Academic and Social). The general impression of the PVC is that many of the actual contacts are, naturally, organized group-wise in group-meetings, lunches, etc. Public ILLC-activities serve a constitutive role. The PhD council is known and appreciated by all. Everybody is happy with the news supply, which is sometimes over-specific, but nobody considers that a problem.

Quite a few candidates don't attend the Cool Logic and the Logic Tea, expressing feelings as something like "not my ilk" or "not my family". As in previous years, we emphasize towards both the organizers and potential speakers and candidates that these are events *from* and *for* the candidates. The only way to adjust the focus and atmosphere of these events is by attending and speaking there.

One general finding, also formulated as such by PhD candidates themselves, is that, while the contingent of MoL students succeed in building a general ILLC-group feeling, no like sentiment is felt to be present among the PhD research community. It is observed that this not only concerns the work carried out in the individual and collaborative PhD projects, but that it is also perceived that the three major ILLC research programmes (LaCo, LaLo and LoCo) work largely independently. The PVC thinks this may be a statement of an obvious and inevitable matter of fact, but it does shine a critical light on the status of the ILLC as an interdisciplinary institute.

Many candidates easily find their ways to international colloquia and summer schools, and also to neighbouring institutions to spend a research visit. Still, we think, quite a few more candidates might profit from stays abroad. A few times a possible visit abroad is postponed or cancelled because of a delay in planning or decision making, or it is not even considered due to unawareness of the relevance of such a stay. We think the candidates and their supervisors should be clearly aware, not only of the available budgets for such activities,

but also of their relevance. They are not just good for a candidate's CV and network, but they are generically beneficial for the research carried out and its impact.

A few candidates expressed a desire for social or personal coaching. Some would like support in planning their career and figuring out what they want to do in life, both during and after their PhD project. Spending so much time dedicated to research and education can form a barrier to addressing broader matters of perhaps a more personal nature that, however, may well affect a career in academia.

4. 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. Career planning ought to be on the agenda of the candidates, their supervisors, and the supplementary programs, as supplied by the Science and the Humanities faculties.

5. Miscellaneous.

- Some feel uneasy about differences in position of the PhD-candidates, with corresponding differences in rights and responsibilities. This is partly due to the differences in the various appointments (Humanities, Science, NWO, none), and difficult to straighten out.
- Sometimes it is felt that activities and responsibilities of a whole research group, not quite exactly planned, hamper individual planning of research and stays abroad.
- Besides quite positive reactions to the PVC activities, we also received, indirectly, a few reserved opinions to the effect that the PVC interviews constitute an additional evaluation and judgement of the individual candidates' work. We cannot but emphasize that this is in no way the purpose of the PVC and, to the best of our knowledge, not the practice. Despite this (our) declaration, given these criticisms, we would like to invite the PhD council to let us hear the candidates' opinion on the PVC.
- The term 'PhD student' is perceived to be degrading, so use 'PhD candidate' instead.
- Make the reference library accessible again.
- The toilets are dirty.

2 Recommendations

The above findings lead us to the following recommendations, some of them repetitions of previous years. The first two are mainly the concern of the ILLC Management Board; the third concerns us all; the fourth is directed at all candidates and supervisors; the fifth is addressed to the PhD program director; the sixth to ourselves; and the seventh to the PhD council.

1. The PVC emphasizes again the need of a second supervisor. We do not think it is sufficient to have a pro forma requirement that a second name be filled in in the OBP. It should be ensured that a second person is indeed involved in a project, not by necessarily engaging in the project, but at least in some monitoring or back-up role. Also if work, health or other matters entail a time-out of a supervising staff member the management board should guarantee that continuation of the supervision is secured.
2. OBPs deserve critical attention regarding (a) clear agreements about regular face-to-face supervision, (b) a second supervisor, and (c) the rights, responsibilities and expectations of the PhD candidates, most importantly those in their first year. Candidates cannot be held responsible for tasks not agreed upon. (Neither can their supervisors, of course.)
3. The PVC does not have specific recommendations to initiate “crossing borders” between the three ILLC areas, at both PhD and staff level. At the PhD level, one initiative might be to look for common knowledge building activities, like for instance a basic logic/CoLaLo course obligatory for all PhD candidates. At the staff level, it might be interesting to have dedicated afternoons where groups/areas X present initial and advanced (PhD and staff) work under the obligatory title “There is no LLC without X” (eLLiCit). The subject any way deserves critical reflection.
4. Research visits abroad can and should be promoted more.
5. The organization, contents, and execution of the obligatory skills courses (especially the project management course) still stands in need of critical and constructive evaluation. Do they serve *their* own stated purposes for *our* particular candidates?
6. The members of the PVC agree to figure as PVC ‘confidants’, until the next PVC gets installed. Candidates can turn to confidants with questions, complaints, worries, problems, etc., that they do not feel comfortable discussing with their supervisor.
7. The PhD candidates should evaluate the PVC.