

PVC Report 2015

Institute for Logic, Language and Computation
University of Amsterdam

Introduction

The PhD Programme eValuation Committee (PVC) has two main aims: (1) to evaluate and maintain the quality of the ILLC PhD Programme as well as the working conditions of the PhD candidates at the ILLC, and (2) to act as an independent confidant to whom PhD candidates can address their concerns. To fulfil these aims, every year the PVC conducts a series of interviews with the PhD candidates. This year, the interviews took place over the second half of April and the committee — consisting of Paul Dekker, Raquel Fernández (chair), Christian Schaffner, and Ivan Titov, with support from the ILLC office by Jenny Batson, Tanja Kassenaar, and Peter van Ormondt — interviewed 50 PhD candidates out of the current 63 candidates affiliated with the institute.¹

The committee first asked each PhD candidate to fill in an online questionnaire to gather some initial input and then talked to each candidate individually for around half an hour.² We 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 compulsory skill courses followed as part of the new PhD programme, e.g., on presentation skills, academic writing, or project management), 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.

Findings and Recommendations

In the sequel we present our main findings organised by topic and, whenever appropriate, formulate specific recommendations mostly oriented towards the Management Team of the ILLC and the PhD Programme Director, but also towards supervisors and towards our PhD community. Some of these recommendations echo issues already raised in previous years but that have not yet been fully resolved.

Research and Supervision

As in previous years, we are glad to observe that overall our PhD candidates are engaged in exciting projects and are productive in their research, publishing papers and giving presentations at local and international events. The interviews confirm that the large majority of PhD candidates are very satisfied with the quality of the supervision they receive. Nevertheless, there certainly are a number of cases where supervision could (and should) be improved, in particular regarding the amount of time and attention dedicated by supervisors to providing guidance and feedback on ongoing work. While the newly established PhD Programme has made great progress in making clear what the rights and duties of PhD candidates are, the daily-supervision duties of supervisors have so far been left rather underspecified (the information in this regard

¹The PhD candidates who are based at the CWI, who reside abroad, who had just started their PhD or were at the very final stages of writing up their thesis were, at their request, not interviewed.

²The online questionnaire had some drawbacks, like not being able to save one's responses for reference, which will be fixed in the future.

contained in the OBP is often seen as a mere formality). Several PhD candidates would welcome changes in this respect — best-practice guidelines for supervisors as something they could fall back on in difficult cases. The PVC is not convinced this would be effective, but encourages the PhD Programme Director to take these remarks into consideration.

We also heard that some candidates feel pressured to publish work that they do not consider to be ready yet. This may be a consequence of the more structured form of the new PhD Programme, which encourages the establishment of clearer milestones at different evaluation points during a PhD trajectory. Although this may be beneficial in the long-run, we remark that some candidates do feel uncomfortably pressed by this.

Even though most PhD candidates have a second supervisor, the interviews revealed that unfortunately this is not yet the case for everyone. In the few cases when problems arise, it is particularly important to be able to rely on a second official supervisor.

Recommendation 1 (second supervisor): The regulations of the ILLC PhD Programme should specify a deadline for appointing a second supervisor, for example during the first year of a PhD project, and mechanisms to take care that this deadline is met should be implemented.

Training

Many of our PhD candidates pursue scientific training activities such as attending international summer schools and following courses locally or online. Overall, candidates seem to be able to find training for those aspects they want to improve. Several of our PhD candidates have also spent, or plan to spend, some time abroad on research visits. The PVC considers this a key aspect of one's training as a researcher and would like to see research visits abroad more generally pursued by our PhD candidates, especially by those who aim to have a career in academia or those who have never worked or studied outside of the Netherlands. We find that both supervisors and PhD candidates often do not realise that research visits should be considered and planned well in advance, certainly before entering the final year of a PhD project.

Similarly, industrial internships can also be attractive and useful training opportunities, especially (but not exclusively) for those who want to pursue a non-academic career after their PhD. Such internships are becoming a prominent option amongst the ILLC PhD community. However, we observe that the way in which industrial internships can be combined with a PhD trajectory is not yet well regulated.

Recommendation 2 (research visits abroad): Supervisors should strongly encourage and offer suggestions for research visits abroad of a few weeks or months. Both supervisors and PhD candidates should actively be involved in planning such visits in advance, to ensure that they are well integrated in the timeline of a PhD trajectory. Ideally, they should take place in the second and/or third year and should be specified in advance in the OBP (Education and Supervision plan).

Recommendation 3 (industrial internships): Supervisors should recognise the potential usefulness of industrial internships. The Management Team, and in particular the PhD Programme Director, should provide transparent rules, for instance with respect to the kind of PhD contracts under which leave (and a contract extension) could be granted to pursue an industrial internship.

Regarding the academic skills courses offered as part of the ILLC PhD Programme, the vast majority of PhD candidates acknowledge the potential value of such courses, but continue to point out that the quality of the courses should be further improved for them to be of real use. The presentation skills course has improved substantially, with fewer hours and smaller groups. However, other courses such as those on project management and writing skills, receive very

negative evaluations. Apparently, some of these courses were known to be unsuitable beforehand (given experiences at the Humanities faculty), and it is therefore frustrating that they were taken up by the new ILLC PhD Programme. In contrast, the career development workshop designed by the ILLC PhD Programme and offered this year received positive comments overall.

As for the scheduling and the compulsory character of skills courses, several PhD candidates expressed unhappiness regarding the lack of clear schedules ahead of time and the possible overlap with the content of other courses that candidates must take as part of their PhD project (e.g., in European international training networks) or at the Faculty of Humanities.³

Recommendation 4 (skills courses): The ILLC PhD Programme should continue working to improve the quality of the skills courses and should, as much as possible, announce the timetable of the courses well in advance. The PhD Programme should also offer flexibility and grant exceptions to those candidates who may get similar compulsory training elsewhere.

Teaching

As mentioned in previous years, thanks to insights gathered in earlier PVC exercises and to the valuable cooperation of the PhD council, the distribution of teaching duties amongst our PhD candidates is currently much better regulated than in the past (certainly amongst those employed by the Faculty of Science). Nevertheless, there are still differences regarding the efforts dedicated to assist with teaching activities, given that clearly not all courses require the same amount and type of dedication. Currently, the ILLC office is working on a system to better keep track of each PhD candidate's teaching load.

We have noticed that there is unclarity regarding the teaching duties in the final year of the PhD. The regulations state that PhD candidates are expected to dedicate 20% of their time to non-research activities such as teaching. However, there seems to be a tacit rule indicating that PhD candidates are not supposed to teach in their final year. What the combination of these two guidelines means in practice is not clearly specified. Amongst other issues, it is not clear when “the final year” starts for teaching purposes, given that the years within a PhD project often do not coincide with academic years. The rules that are currently stated in the ILLC PhD Programme website do not appear to be the ones that are currently being implemented and this obviously causes uncertainty.

Recommendation 5 (teaching duties in the last year): The ILLC Management Team in consultation with the PhD Council should provide more precise rules regarding teaching, in particular with respect to the final year of the PhD.

Cross-disciplinarity at the ILLC

A recurrent topic emerging during the PVC interviews over the years is the apparent lack of interaction between the different research areas at the ILLC, which nevertheless presents itself as an interdisciplinary institute. In relation to this, there is the feeling amongst some PhD candidates that certain areas, such as Cognitive Science and Computational Linguistics, are not well incorporated into what is taken to be the “core” of the ILLC. As in previous years, we point out that to a great extent the crossing of boundaries within the institute is in the hands of the PhD candidates themselves. Currently, the Logic Tea seminar series is the only venue for PhD candidates to present their research amongst themselves. However, a substantial section of PhDs do not feel represented by this series (the name of the series certainly does not help to promote inclusiveness). Obviously, it is for the ILLC PhD community to decide how to manage

³It emerged that some PhD candidates employed by the Faculty of Humanities are still expected to follow skills courses there.

their own seminar, but nevertheless the PVC would like to suggest the adoption of a policy that more actively seeks to cover the variety of research projects running at the ILLC.

Recommendation 6 (ILLC PhD seminar): The PhD council possibly together with the current organisers of the Logic Tea are encouraged to consider a more inclusive version of a PhD seminar series that systematically seeks talks from all research areas at the ILLC on a rotation basis.

Facilities and other Practical Matters

Several PhD candidates made remarks regarding computing facilities. An important issue that came up concerns the current lack of computing infrastructure at the ILLC, especially given the poor quality and lack of flexibility of the university IT services. Although servers are available within some research groups, there are no shared machines that can be used by the institute at large to store data and run computational experiments. The PVC fully agrees with these concerns and further points out that this does not only affect PhD candidates but also members of the senior staff. The number of people at the ILLC doing data-driven research seems to be increasing and, if this kind of research is to be encouraged, it makes sense to look for a collective solution at the level of the institute rather than only relying on ad hoc solutions handled by research groups independently. We realise that this is not a minor task, but we urge the ILLC management to initiate the process towards a solution.

Recommendation 7 (computing infrastructure): The Management Team should devise a plan to provide the institute with appropriate shared servers accessible to the ILLC community at large and ideally administered locally by the institute.

In connection to computing facilities, we also heard that the PhD candidates who get a so-called “self-support” computer receive poor information on what to expect and how to get started. This information should be incorporated in the welcome package handed out to new PhD candidates who join the ILLC.

In addition, here are some facilities that some of our PhD candidates would like to see at the ILLC (food for thought for the Management Team): a “lab” for running experiments with human subjects at the Science Park location, more inspiring and nicely decorated offices for PhD candidates, a changing room for ILLCers who like to do sports around the institute, a “quiet room” with a reclining chair or sofa to take a break and rest (the latter two appear to be facilities available to our neighbours at the CWI). Finally, some PhD candidates consider that the UvA could be more active in helping PhD candidates to find affordable (on campus) accommodation.

The Future of the PVC Process

The PVC was also busy discussing the extent to which the current PhD Programme evaluation process, consisting of yearly individual interviews with all PhD candidates, is feasible given the rate at which our PhD community is growing⁴ Obviously, the committee invests an enormous amount of time and effort in conducting this evaluation, and we naturally wonder whether equivalent results could be achieved by other less intensive means. Furthermore, although we are convinced of the usefulness of the interviews (we know from experience that the opportunity to discuss matters face to face with the PVC is appreciated, especially by those candidates who may experience some difficulties), we would like to receive more general feedback from the PhD community. In last year’s PVC report, the committee asked the ILLC Management Team to

⁴E.g., in 2007 there were 40 PhD candidates working at the ILLC, while there are 63 at the time of writing.

evaluate the PVC interviews through the PhD council, but unfortunately this did not materialise and no feedback has yet reached us.

Recommendation 8 (evaluation of the PVC interviewing process): The PhD council should conduct an evaluation of the PVC interviews as soon as possible and provide feedback to the ILLC Management Team and the PVC members on the usefulness of the current interviewing process.

We have considered some alternatives to the current process that could make it less time-consuming while hopefully maintaining the same level of effectiveness. For example, an evaluation questionnaire could be sent to all PhD candidates every year (as currently done), but the individual interviews could take place only biannually, or alternatively explicit interview appointments could be made only with PhD candidates in the second year of their PhD project while candidates at other stages could request an interview if they consider it useful. These are only some ideas. In any case, once feedback from the PhD council has been received, we encourage the Management Team to discuss with the PVC possibilities for the future. It may indeed be time for change.

Amsterdam, 22 June 2015

Raquel Fernández
on behalf of the PVC 2015