

PVC Report 2016

Institute for Logic, Language and Computation
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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 committee — consisting of Nick Bezhanishvili, Raquel Fernández (chair), Christian Schaffner, and Daniel Wiechmann, with support from Tanja Kassenaar — piloted a new evaluation procedure. The committee first gathered information from all PhD candidates through an online questionnaire, where in addition to providing information on their experiences in the PhD Programme, each candidate could indicate whether they would like to meet up with the committee. Based on the questionnaire responses, the PVC decided on the list of PhD candidates to be interviewed, which included all the 2nd-year candidates by default. Out of the 60 candidates affiliated with the institute on the 1st of April 2016, the committee interviewed 11 PhD candidates (all of them in their second year except 4).¹

In the questionnaire sent to all PhD candidates as well as in the 11 interviews, we discussed (the organisational aspects of) the PhD candidates' 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 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 questionnaires and the interviews confirm that the large majority of PhD candidates are very satisfied with the quality of the supervision they receive. Nevertheless, there 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

¹As is customary, the PhD candidates who are based at the CWI or who reside abroad, were not called for an interview.

guidance and feedback on ongoing work. As already observed in last year's report, 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. While the PVC is not convinced that establishing hard rules for supervisors would be effective, we do recommend a more open and frequent discussion of these issues, amongst staff members and between the PhD candidates and their supervisors.

Recommendation 1 (supervisor meetings): The PhD Programme director should organise regular staff meetings where staff members with supervision roles can discuss general rights and duties of PhD supervisors and share best practices. A first meeting is already planned for late May 2016 and we welcome this initiative.

Recommendation 2 (communication): The PhD candidates are strongly encouraged to speak up if they are not satisfied with the supervision they receive, by openly talking to their supervisors or by contacting the PVC. We urge the PhD mentors (who will soon be part of the PhD programme) to emphasise this issue, especially amongst new students.

We also heard that some candidates feel pressured to publish before they consider their work to be ready, especially during the first year, which in principle should be a period for acquiring solid knowledge. However, other candidates find encouragement to publish positive, and still others would like to have even more incentives to publish, such as contests or rewards. The questionnaires and the interviews also revealed that almost all PhD candidates work considerably more than 38 hours per week as part of their PhD. Many feel pressured by their supervisors and by the ILLC environment to work more than what their contract specifies. A few are (very) unhappy about this, while for others it is not a problem. The PVC remarks that, to minimise uncomfortable pressure to work extra hours and to publish, it is critical for supervisors to make clear what their expectations are at an early stage.

Recommendation 3 (expectations): The PhD candidates and their supervisors should discuss openly what their expectations are regarding time investment and published research output.

The new PhD Programme encourages the establishment of milestones at different evaluation points during a PhD trajectory. However, although this procedure may be beneficial in the long run, currently some of the planning and evaluation instruments in the PhD programme are not perceived as useful and are not sufficiently well defined. In particular, the procedures surrounding the key evaluation at the end of the first year of a PhD project (pilot study plus assessment interview) are not clear to many PhD candidates and their supervisors. In addition, the Education & Supervision plan (*Opleidings- en Begeleidingsplan*, OBP) is considered a largely useless mere formality by many. The PVC notes that this is a lost opportunity since, in principle, the OBP could help to clarify important aspects concerning supervision and expectations (as per Recommendations 2 and 3 above).

Recommendation 4 (first-year assessment): The first-year evaluation should be made clearer, both to the supervisors and to the PhD candidates. Aspects to be clarified include the 'pilot study' (what does it consist of) and the procedure surrounding the assessment meeting (who needs to be there, who is the chair, what is expected to happen during the meeting).

Recommendation 5 (OBP): The OBP form is in need of revision. It should be redesigned to make it more concise and more effective in fulfilling its purpose.

Training

The following comments from the PVC Report 2015 continue to be a good description of the state of affairs observed by the committee this year: 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 such stays abroad 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.

We therefore restate our Recommendation 2 from the PVC Report 2015:

Recommendation 5 (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).

Last year, the PVC pointed out that industrial internships were becoming a prominent option amongst the ILLC PhD community. We have observed the same trend this year. Indeed, industrial internships can be attractive and useful training opportunities, especially (but not exclusively) for those who want to pursue a non-academic career after their PhD. Nevertheless, not all supervisors are in favour of industrial internships. Although individual supervisors are of course entitled to have their own opinion on this matter, the PVC considers that industrial internships should be an option available to all PhD candidates. It is therefore critical to have clear regulations regarding how industrial internships can be combined with a PhD trajectory. This does not seem to be in place yet, and thus we restate our Recommendation 3 from the PVC Report 2015:

Recommendation 6 (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 majority of PhD candidates acknowledge the potential value of such courses, but continue to point out that the quality of some courses should be further improved for them to be of real use. We have observed that channels to give feedback about the courses (typically, anonymous written questionnaires) are not always effective and that they tend to underrepresent PhD candidates with positive or constructive opinions. Different ways of providing more personal feedback (i.e., directly talking to Tanja) may thus be more effective in helping to improve the courses' quality.

The scheduling of the courses continues to be somewhat problematic: once more, several PhD candidates expressed unhappiness regarding the lack of clear schedules ahead of time. Given the different agendas of our many PhD candidate, scheduling such courses is of course a difficult logistic problem, but we encourage the PhD programme to strive to find a better solution.

Recommendation 7 (skills courses): The ILLC PhD Programme should continue working to improve the quality of the skills courses, by gathering personal feedback in interviews (in addition to written evaluations), and should, as much as possible, announce the timetable of the courses well in advance.

Teaching

Over the last year, the ILLC Management Team and the PhD Council have been working on a system to better keep track of each PhD candidate's teaching load and thus try to minimise differences regarding the efforts dedicated to assist with teaching activities amongst PhD candidates. While we expect this new system to be an improvement over the current situation in the long run, the PVC points out that communication with PhD candidates about the status of the negotiations during this long period has been far less than ideal. The bad communication has led to a lot of uncertainty and stress since many PhD candidates did not have a clear idea of how the new system would affect their teaching duties. The communication needs to be improved in the future.

Recommendation 8 (new regulations on teaching duties): The ILLC Management Team and the PhD Council should provide timely information to all PhD candidates on the new regulations of the TA allocation and the quantification of teaching tasks. The new system should of course be evaluated after a first round, and clear and timely information should be provided on the results and consequences of this evaluation.

Facilities and other Practical Matters

The PVC heard again several complains regarding computer-related facilities, e.g., slow desktop computers and lack of facilities for backing up data. In last year's report, we urged the ILLC management to initiate a process to solve the lack of proper computing infrastructure at the ILLC — an issue that has become more prominent with the increase of people at the institute doing data-driven research. The management team has apparently started to make some steps in this direction, but to date no concrete improvements have yet taken place. We therefore restate our Recommendation 8 from the PVC Report 2015:

Recommendation 9 (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.

Several PhD candidates mentioned that, at the start of a PhD contract, it can take a substantial amount of time to get all the paper work and the computer facilities in full working order (e.g., it is not clear what to expect and how to get started with a so-called “self-support” computer). As suggested last year, more detailed information for setting up computers should be incorporated in the welcome package handed out to new PhD candidates who join the ILLC. Furthermore, the explanations on the web pages of the PhD Programme are unnecessarily long and complicated at times and thus could be improved.

Recommendation 10 (better explanations): The welcome package for new PhD candidates and the webpages of the PhD Programme should be revised to make them more informative when needed and clearer and more concise whenever possible.

In addition, here are some facilities that according to some PhD candidates are in need of improvement: There is an insufficient number of meeting rooms; some offices do not have enough natural light; some PhD candidates are asked to move office too often; the kitchen in the common room is too small and impractical; there are not enough power plugs in the common room and in the kitchenette on the second floor; the seminar room has a poor sound system (particularly important for the music cognition group); the toilets are in need of renovation; and the food options at the Science Park are very limited and of bad quality overall. We encourage the Management Team to take these points into consideration.

The New PVC Process

Last year, the PVC recommended a redesign of the PVC process motivated by the large increase of our PhD community, which made it unfeasible to interview all PhD candidates face-to-face on a yearly basis.² As mentioned in the introduction to this document, this year's PVC has tested a new evaluation procedure consisting in receiving yearly feedback from all PhD candidates via an online questionnaire and only holding interviews with all 2nd-year PhD candidates by default. Other PhD candidates are also welcome to request an interview with the PVC by indicating in the questionnaire that they wish to have a discussion in person, and the committee may also take the initiative and decide to invite other PhD candidates.

Unfortunately, this year's pilot run of the new procedure was hampered by an unforeseen difficulty: due to a misunderstanding, the questionnaire that was initially sent out to the PhD candidates was not the one intended by the committee. Amongst other things, the incorrect questionnaire included too many multiple-choice questions that were unsuitable for getting qualitative, personalised feedback and did not have any space for additional comments. The PhD candidates were alerted of this issue and were invited to fill in the correct questionnaire, if they wished to do so.

Despite this problem, which will certainly be avoided in the future, generally our hope is that the new procedure will maintain the same level of effectiveness while being less time-consuming. However, some concerns were raised by some PhD candidates, who wondered whether the lack of compulsory interviews on a yearly basis would lead to some problems not being detected. Indeed, we know from experience that it is only during a PVC interview that candidates may realise that their PhD experience could be improved. Nevertheless, the feeling of the PVC after this first pilot run is that with this new format the committee gets substantial information. This new format, however, needs to be assessed — a task that unfortunately is made slightly more difficult given the unforeseen problems with the initial questionnaire.

Recommendation 11 (evaluation of the new PVC process): The PhD Council should conduct an evaluation of the new PVC procedure, including the features of the yearly online questionnaire and the new regime of interviews, and provide feedback to the ILLC Management Team and the PVC members as soon as possible.

Overall, the committee welcomes feedback from the PhD Council and the Management Team on the new PVC procedure, and is confident that we will be able to arrive at a feasible and effective scheme that will keep ensuring the quality of the ILLC PhD Programme.

Amsterdam, 19 May 2016

Raquel Fernández
on behalf of the PVC 2016

²E.g., in 2007 there were 40 PhD candidates working at the ILLC, while there are 62 at the time of writing and several others are expected to start in September this year.