

PVC report 2017

Institute for Logic, Language and Computation
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Introduction

The ILLC PhD Programme eValuation Committee (PVC) provides one of the main tools for the institute to monitor the quality of its PhD programme and the working conditions and well-being of its PhD candidates; at the same time, the committee members act as independent confidants to whom PhD candidates can address their concerns and worries.

The main task of the PVC is to perform an extensive annual evaluation of the ILLC PhD programme. As of 2016, this evaluation consists of two parts. First the committee gathers information from all PhD candidates by means of an online questionnaire. The PVC questionnaire addresses all kinds of aspects of a PhD project, including organisational matters, supervision, training, teaching tasks, networking, practical matters, workload, career planning, etc. Second, the PVC selects some candidates for individual and confidential talks with PVC members; by default this selection includes all candidates who are in the second year of their project. All of the topics listed above can be discussed in more detail during these ‘PVC talks’.

The PVC of 2017 consisted of Benno van den Berg, Tamara Dobler, Peter van Ormondt (secretary), Yde Venema (chair) and Daniel Wiechmann. Out of the 52 candidates affiliated with the institute on 1 April 2107, the committee received 49 completed questionnaires, and interviewed 17 PhD candidates (including, indeed, all candidates in their second year, and many of those who have been at the ILLC for more than four years). In this report we present our main findings and recommendations; most of these recommendations are addressed to the ILLC management, but some are directed towards the ILLC community as a whole, and/or to the supervisors of PhD candidates.

Summary Based on the responses to the questionnaire and our talks with individual PhD candidates, we believe that generally the ILLC provides an excellent environment for the training of young researchers. In particular, the large majority of ILLC PhD candidates are happily and productively working on exciting research projects, guided by committed supervisors. Nevertheless, there are some issues that do need the attention of the management; the most important of these concern the *division of roles between the supervisors*, the *skills courses* offered by the programme, and some *practical aspects and working conditions*. Besides this we want to mention the problem of the arrangement of *teaching tasks* for PhD candidates that are affiliated with the Faculty of Humanities.

Findings and Recommendations

In the following we group together our main findings by topic.

Generally, our impression was that much (but not all) of the dust, that was raised by the introduction of the new ILLC PhD programme in recent years, is starting to settle down. PhD candidates seem

to appreciate the increased clarity concerning rules and regulations; in particular, the information on the personal tracking page of the ILLC website was much welcomed. Many of the issues raised below are somehow related to the fact that PhD candidates are not always sure what is expected of them or what they can expect of their supervisors, how they may operate to achieve certain goals, etc.

Supervision & Assessment

There are considerable differences in the kind of supervision that PhD candidates receive at the ILLC; this applies to almost all aspects of the supervision: number of supervisors, frequency of meetings, nature of these meetings, etc. The PVC has no reason to comment on these differences per se; what we do find important is that it should be clear to the PhD candidates what their supervisors expect of them in terms of scientific output and other matters, and what they can expect from their supervisors in terms of guidance, support and feedback. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Even the *terminology* seems to be confusing: based on the responses to the questionnaire, the interpretations of the terms ‘main supervisor’, ‘second supervisor’ and ‘promotor’ differ from one candidate to another.

Requiring special attention is the *lack of clarity as to the division of roles and responsibilities within the supervisory team*. For instance, to our surprise it is not common knowledge at our institute that one of the tasks of the main supervisor is to guide the candidate into the scientific community (conferences, publication strategies, networking).

Recommendation 1 *The main supervisor should ensure that it is clear to the PhD candidate what s/he can expect from the various individual members of the supervision team. The ILLC management should emphasize to all supervisors that this requires action on their part.*

As a suggestion, at the start of each PhD project, the PhD Programme director could encourage the candidate and the supervisors to explicitly discuss these expectations in a joint meeting at the start of the project, referring to the ILLC web page describing a Code of Practice for supervisors. The institute management could also initiate discussions of this Code of Practice between supervisors.

More specifically, a potential source of problems is the division of roles and responsibilities between the main supervisor and the promotor, in case these are different persons. For instance, *before* the candidate starts writing up the manuscript, we believe it should be crystal clear to all parties to which degree the promotor may still shape the content and wording of the thesis, but this is not always the case.

In a number of cases, all concerning interdisciplinary projects with both internal and external supervisors, it was not clear which member of the supervision team would take the full academic responsibility for the project.

Recommendation 2 *There should always be at least one supervisor who has the expertise to take full academic responsibility for the PhD project.*

In case an ILLC-based PhD candidate is working on an interdisciplinary project involving external supervisors, it is highly preferable that the above-mentioned supervisor is a staff member of the ILLC. If this is not the case, the PhD Programme director should take special care to monitor the supervision of the PhD candidate.

On a different note, we have encountered situations where, contrary to the spirit of the UvA regulations, the PhD candidate has no or only a pro forma second supervisor. We want to point out that this is an undesirable situation that constitutes a serious risk to the PhD candidate — what will happen if the main supervisor is (temporary) absent or unable to supervise the project?

As to the critical first-year *assessment* of ILLC candidates, two remarks are in order. First, there is still confusion over the desired nature of the *nine-month report* (aka pilot study). We recommend

that the PhD Programme director addresses this issue (possibly by publishing a list of all possible types of document). Second, while the first-year assessment has real consequences and thus will never be completely stress-free, quite a few PhD candidates experience anxiety over this. In many of these cases, this could be simply avoided if the supervisor would have sent out reassuring signals in the period before the formal assessment meeting.

Training Programme

One of the main changes brought about by the new ILLC PhD programme is that the institute has taken the full responsibility for its training programme. From the beginning there have been many complaints about the quality, duration, scheduling and compulsory nature of the *skills courses* that form a key ingredient of this training programme.

For a number of reasons, the PVC 2017 is hesitant to give any concrete recommendations concerning these skills courses. First of all, we did not perform a specific investigation dedicated towards this side of the PhD programme, and we received very mixed opinions on this. And second, all skills courses taught at ILLC have already been evaluated extensively, and the training programme as such has frequently been discussed between the ILLC management and the PhD Council.

Nevertheless, we do want to make some general observations and one recommendation. First of all, one cautious observation is that the PhD community sees that the quality of the skills courses is improving. On the other hand, the current situation, which still witnesses such a large degree of dissatisfaction among the PhD population about their training programme, is far from ideal. There should be no disagreement between management and students about a training programme.

We realize that the institute is bound by some regulations imposed by higher powers, we are aware of the great challenges in the design of skills courses for a critical audience, and we appreciate the efforts taken by the ILLC management to increase the quality of the training programme. It goes without saying that the PhD Programme director should make every effort to increase the quality of the skills courses, and so we will not make this an explicit recommendation. We do want to make the following point separately and explicitly, however.

Recommendation 3 *The ILLC management should strive towards full agreement with the PhD community about the necessity and organisation of the training programme.*

Below we list some suggestions that were made by PhD candidates on this matter, and we added some of our own.

- justify or at least clarify why some courses are mandatory;
- allow more *flexibility* as to when students may take certain classes;
- offer PhD candidates a *choice* between courses instead of making all courses compulsory;
- never force candidates to take courses they do not deem useful;
- reduce the group size of classes.

Teaching

Since the organisation of teaching tasks for PhD candidates is organised very differently in the two Faculties participating in the ILLC, we discuss these separately. At the *Faculty of Science*, the situation seems to have been improved with the new regulations. The PVC recommends that the system of assigning points to teaching tasks, and the administration of these points, is evaluated by next year's PVC.

At the Faculty of Humanities, the regulations concerning teaching tasks, and more in particular the implementation of these regulations, remain highly problematic. Unfortunately, none of the observations we make here are new. The main problem is that for PhD candidates, who have opted for

a 4-year 80% contract, it is generally very difficult to impossible to find suitable teaching tasks for the remaining 20% of their time, even for the one year where such an extension is supposedly guaranteed by the Faculty. It cannot be the responsibility of the PhD candidate alone to find his/her way in this matter.

Recommendation 4 *The ILLC management should press the Faculty of Humanities to facilitate the assignment of teaching tasks to PhD candidates; in particular, there should be a clear procedure implementing the regulation that PhD candidates have the right to supplement their position with a 20% teaching task for the duration of at least one year.*

In addition, the supervisor of a PhD candidate who is looking for teaching experience should take some responsibility in the search for suitable opportunities.

In general, it seems that the PhD Council organises the distribution of teaching tasks to PhD candidates quite well.

Working conditions & practical matters

Several, rather diverse, issues need to be discussed that fall under the heading of working conditions and practicalities.

First of all, we heard from several PhD candidates that it took them quite a while to get acquainted with the institute, its members and the way things get organised at the ILLC. For many new ILLC members, their very first day was rather confusing. We are aware of the fact that as of 2016, the ILLC has appointed two student mentors to guide new PhD candidates into the institute and its community. We appreciate this initiative but believe that the institute could do more to provide a welcoming atmosphere for its new members.

Recommendation 5 *The ILLC should install a more structured welcoming programme for its new members.*

One small, concrete thing that the supervisor could do is simply to be *present* on the first day that a new PhD candidate arrives, so that s/he can introduce the candidate to various members of the institute, and make sure that the candidate gets installed properly.

The second issues concerns the *travel budget* of PhD candidates. We are aware that the financial organization of the institute is complex, that PhD projects in particular come in various shapes and sizes, with very different funding schemes and financial conditions, so that it is difficult to formulate general rules to indicate the annual budget that PhD candidates have for travelling to conferences, summer schools, or for research visits. Nevertheless, for some PhD candidates it is not clear at all how much money they have for academic travelling, for which kind of trips they can spend their money, and who decides on this.

Recommendation 6 *The ILLC management should ensure that it is clear to each PhD candidate what their annual travel budget is, and who decides for which purposes this money can be spent.*

Third, we heard many comments about the suboptimal state of the facilities (common room, kitchen, and particularly the toilets) at SP 107. These comments are not new, and neither is the following recommendation; nevertheless, we urge the ILLC management to take this matter seriously.

Recommendation 7 *The ILLC management should make an effort to improve the quality of various facilities at SP 107, in particular those of the common room, the kitchen and the toilets.*

Finally, the PVC questionnaire contains a question on the balance between work and free time. While we received widely different answers to this question, we do need to signal that work pressure can be a serious problem for some of our young researchers. We certainly do not believe that there is a one-size-fits-all balance between working hours and private life, and we find it difficult to distill a concrete recommendation out of our findings. But at the very least, we want to make it clear that this issue also plays a role at the ILLC, and say the following.

Recommendation 8 *The institute should create an atmosphere in which questions related to the balance between working hours and private life can be discussed openly, and in which ILLC members can make their own decisions without pressure from their peers or supervisors.*

We also want to encourage the PhD Programme director to pay attention to this issue, and to think about ways to create the mentioned atmosphere among the PhD candidates.

Other issues

One other issue that needs some discussion is the status of and support for PhD candidates with ‘overdue dissertations’, that is, PhD candidates whose project has formally expired but who did not yet finish their dissertation. While each of these cases is different, we believe that in general it would be good if some member of the institute, for instance the PhD Programme director, would every now and then contact the candidate concerned, to offer some moral support and show continued interest from the side of the institute. In some individual cases the institute might consider to offer some tailored assistance if this would facilitate a breakthrough in a critical stage of the process.

Amsterdam, June 1, 2017
Yde Venema
on behalf of the PVC 2017