

ILLC PhD Programme Evaluation 2018

Institute for Logic, Language, and Computation
University of Amsterdam
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Introduction

The ILLC PhD Programme eValuation Committee (PVC) monitors the quality of the ILLC 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 meetings with PVC members; by default this selection includes all candidates who are in their second year. All of the topics listed above can be discussed in more detail during these meetings.

The PVC of 2018 consisted of Benno van den Berg, Elia Bruni, Debbie Klaassen (secretary), Aybüke Özgün, and Floris Roelofsen (chair). Out of the 42 candidates affiliated with the institute on 1 April 2018, the committee received 39 completed questionnaires, and interviewed 19 PhD candidates, including all candidates in their second year, 13 in total. In this report we present our main findings and recommendations; most of these recommendations are addressed to the PhD programme management, but some are directed towards the supervisors of PhD candidates, and/or to the ILLC community as a whole.

Findings and recommendations

Based on the responses to the questionnaire and our meetings with individual PhD candidates, we believe that the ILLC generally 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 is room for further improvement. We have grouped our main findings and recommendations by topic.

Selection

The PVC finds that PhD candidates should be selected/screened more carefully before being admitted to the programme. This is especially the case when (i) candidates intend to join the programme with their own funding, and (ii) when candidates are selected without a face-to-face interview. Special attention should be paid to the level of the candidate's spoken and written English. If this level is not sufficient, problems are bound to arise if the candidate is admitted to the programme.

Recommendation 1: The PhD programme director and hiring committees should see to it that candidates are carefully selected. In particular, besides domain-specific knowledge and skills, a high level of spoken and written English should be mandatory.

Supervision

It is important for PhD candidates to have a second supervisor who is truly involved in the project, not just a pro forma promotor, and who can take the lead in case the first supervisor becomes unavailable. The PVC encountered a number of concrete cases in which this would have avoided problems.

Recommendation 2: The PhD management should see to it that all candidates have a second supervisor.

Progress tracking and assessment

PhD candidates generally find their personal progress tracking website very useful. They would find it convenient if the website also kept track of the teaching points they acquired so far. As for the yearly assessment procedures, in some cases there is still some unclarity about the goals and requirements for the pilot study related to the first-year assessment (despite recent efforts to improve this). Moreover, it would be good to make the forms for yearly evaluations visible to PhD candidates before their assessment meetings, so that they know what the criteria are and can reflect on them beforehand (currently the forms are only visible to supervisors).

Recommendation 3: The PhD management should follow the above suggestions to further improve the progress tracking website and the yearly assessment procedures.

Academic skills course

PhD candidates are generally very positive about the writing course and the presentation course. The time management course offers useful information during the first session, but follow-up sessions seem to have little added value. One comment about the writing course is that it is tailored for candidates who have a reasonably high entry level. Candidates with a lower entry level would benefit more from a more basic course (see, however, Recommendation 1 above).

Recommendation 4: The time management course should be streamlined, and perhaps a more basic writing course should be offered to candidates with a lower entry level.

Community building

PhD candidates at the ILLC generally feel that they belong to a stimulating community. There are, however, a number of points that deserve attention. First, ILLC PhD candidates in Philosophy are relatively isolated. Most of them do not have much contact with PhD candidates in Philosophy that do not belong to the ILLC, because the latter identify with a different organisational unit and their research methodologies are often also quite different. Moreover, it is also challenging for ILLC PhD candidates in Philosophy to maintain ties with

other PhD candidates at the ILLC, mostly because the latter are housed at Science Park rather than in the city centre.

A second point is that, when new PhD candidates arrive at the ILLC, they are sometimes not sufficiently informed about the ILLC community. As a result it can take them quite a while to find their way around and to start feeling at home.

Finally, the PVC learned that the PhD council has been rather inactive for some time. While it has recently been revived with new members, the PVC would like to stress the importance of an active PhD council. Perhaps the programme management could stimulate this by giving the council a budget for activities and by giving credit points for council membership, which would allow members to compensate their time investment by lowering their teaching load.

Recommendation 5: The PhD management should further enhance the sense of community among PhD candidates by creating a welcoming package and by ensuring the continuation of the PhD council.

Career perspectives

There is a substantial need among PhD candidates for information about their career perspectives, both within and beyond academia. The *career lunch* that was recently organised was very much appreciated.

Recommendation 6: PhD supervisors should regularly discuss career perspectives with their students. The PhD management should continue to organise career lunches or similar events.

Teaching and organisational tasks

PhD candidates are generally happy with the amount and the kind of teaching activities that they are involved in. Some indicate that the point system is not entirely clear to them, and that the number of points for a course should perhaps be flexible---determined after the course based on the actual amount of work rather than in advance. The PVC believes this may create an overkill of administrative work, but concedes that there should be flexibility if a course turns out to require much more work than anticipated.

Another suggestion made by several PhD candidates is that points should not only be given for teaching activities, but also for PhD council work and other organisational work (see Recommendation 5 above).

Recommendation 7: The PhD management should strive to further clarify the point system, be flexible when courses require considerably more work than anticipated, and consider rewarding points for substantial organisational tasks.

Diversity of PhD arrangements

PhD candidates at the ILLC do not all have the same arrangements. Some have personal funding, others are part of a project with funding from NWO or ERC, and yet others are funded by the UvA. Some candidates are hired by the Faculty of Humanities (FGw), others by the Faculty of Science (FNWI). This situation comes with a number of potential pitfalls. In particular:

- For candidates with a personal grant, it can be difficult to become part of a research group;
- Candidates with a personal grant from another country often have a substantially lower income than candidates who are funded by the UvA, NWO, or ERC. They should get compensated for teaching activities, or else be exempted from such activities.
- The travel budget for PhD candidates to attend conferences and summer schools often differs from project to project. This should be normalised as much as possible.
- Some PhD candidates have paid internships in industry. There is currently no standard procedure to arrange this administratively. It would be helpful to set up general guidelines for this.

Recommendation 8: The PhD management should be aware of the pitfalls that the diversity of arrangements gives rise to, be transparent about existing differences, and normalise where possible.

Stress reduction

Quite a few PhD candidates experience work-related stress. Some have difficulties finding enough time for research, given their TA work, academic skills courses, and the seminars that they are expected to attend. Some feel pressure to produce grand new ideas and are insecure about being able to meet these expectations. Others mention having been disillusioned by negative reviews of papers that they put their whole heart and soul into.

Recommendation 9: The PhD management should take measures to prevent work-related stress among PhD candidates, and to make sure that help is found in case problems do arise. The PVC has two concrete suggestions:

- Organise a monthly open “walk-in” coaching session with an experienced counsellor. This way, candidates can share their worries, receive advice from the counsellor and their peers, and will more easily find their way to personal help if needed.
- Explicitly tell PhD candidates---perhaps as part of their “welcoming package”---that they are encouraged to discuss work/life balance with their supervisor. For instance, they should know that it is completely reasonable to take a break from work during weekends.

Amsterdam, 21 November 2018
 Floris Roelofsen
 on behalf of the PVC 2018