

ILLC PhD Programme Evaluation 2021

Institute for Logic, Language and Computation

University of Amsterdam

January 20, 2022

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. In 2021, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the progress and well-being of the PhD candidates were explicitly discussed during the interviews.

The PVC of 2021 consisted of Hein van den Berg, Johannes Marti, Aybüke Özgün (chair), and Ekaterina Schutova. Out of the 61 candidates affiliated with the institute on 1 April 2021, 40 were invited to fill in the questionnaires (the other 13 were employed elsewhere, 6 were not invited due to temporary inactivity, 1 first-year student who had just started the PhD programme has been contacted at a later stage). The committee received 39 completed questionnaires, and interviewed 17 PhD candidates. This includes all candidates in their second year, 8 in total, and candidates who are beyond their fourth year, 4 in total. The PVC further invited 5 candidates for interviews. 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

Summary: 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. The PhD candidates form a vibrant, motivated, and intellectually creative community. 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 always room for further improvement. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic that started to affect the Netherlands around March 2020 had negative

impacts on the academic progress and well-being of some PhD candidates. We have grouped our main findings and recommendations by topic.

Supervision

It is a rule at the ILLC that every PhD candidate has at least two supervisors (a promotor and a co-promotor) and all PhD candidates currently have at least two supervisors. There are differences in the kind of supervision each PhD candidate receives, in terms of frequency and nature of meetings, the level of involvement of each supervisor in the PhD project etc. This works well for most of our PhD candidates and the PVC sees no reason to streamline *every* aspect of supervision via a set of strict rules that might not work for everyone. However, we do find important that it is clear to the PhD candidates what they can expect from their supervisors, in particular, what the role of each supervisor will be throughout the PhD process and how often they should expect to have supervision meetings, and what their supervisors and the institute expect of them in terms of scientific output, teaching tasks, organizational matters etc. The PVC encountered a few cases where the division of responsibilities within the supervision team was not clear and there was not an agreed-upon frequency of supervision meetings.

Recommendation 1: The main supervisor should make sure that it is clear to the PhD candidate and the members of the supervision team what they can expect from each other in all aspects of supervision. The PhD management team should help regulate this process via a written document (such as a form or a code of practice) and ensure that the division of tasks among the supervisors and the candidate is explicitly discussed in the beginning of the PhD programme and updated regularly as the project progresses.

Discussion on societal relevance of research

The ILLC encourages its PhD candidates to think about the societal relevance of their research and explore how their research results could be extended to gain (more) societal relevance. The PhD candidates who work on relatively applied topics seem to have considered societal relevance of their projects and discussed this aspect of their research with their supervisors. However, the PVC found that the PhD candidates who work on rather theoretical subjects do not pay special attention to societal relevance of their work or discuss this aspect of their research with their supervisors.

Recommendation 2: We advise the PhD candidates and the supervisors to have an open discussion about the societal relevance of their research, as far as the research topic allows.

Nine-month report (pilot study)

Despite the recent efforts to improve the clarity of the nine-month assessment, there is still confusion among supervisors and PhD candidates over the goals, requirements, and the nature of the *nine-month report* (aka pilot study). The unclarity of the nine-month evaluation process seems to cause some candidates extra work and stress.

Recommendation 3: The PhD management team should make sure to streamline this process and inform all supervisors (both promotors and co-promotors) as to what is expected from the nine-month report. Making a few sample pilot studies on different topics accessible to PhD candidates and supervisors could be helpful.

Academic skills courses

PhD candidates in general greatly appreciate and are very positive about the academic skills courses. However, there are some complaints about their scheduling and the fact that they are obligatory. Most of the skills courses are scheduled in the first eighteen months of the PhD programme. This is too much for some of the PhD candidates, especially if they also have to teach and want to follow academic courses. Moreover, some PhD candidates might have already taken similar courses, such as Academic Writing and Presentation Skills, at some earlier stage in their education/career. These students should be given the choice of not taking these courses.

Recommendation 4: The PhD programme should allow for more flexibility as to which skills courses a PhD candidate has to take (instead of making all skills courses obligatory) and when they may take certain classes. These can be decided in consultation with the candidate's supervisors. We also recommend scheduling the academic writing course in the first year of the PhD programme, if this is still not the case.

Teaching and organizational tasks

We are aware that the PhD council and the PhD management team have spent a lot of effort in organizing the teaching tasks and hours of the PhD candidates in a fair way. They have considerably improved the way teaching tasks are allocated in the last few years. However, for some courses, the assigned teaching hours still do not seem to reach the actual hours spent and there does not seem to be any clear policy as to how to mediate teaching overtime. This seems to be an issue especially for large course.

Recommendation 5: We advise the PhD management team to regularly check the number of hours PhD candidates spend on teaching and, if possible, increase the number of teaching assistants assigned to a course when the actual workload regularly exceeds what has been agreed. Moreover, The PhD management team should decide on clear rules to regulate how to compensate for teaching hours when the actual workload diverges significantly from what has been allocated. Both the PhD candidates and the lecturers should be informed about these regulations.

Community building

The majority of PhD candidates of the ILLC has created a stimulating and friendly community, and many PhD candidates feel that they belong to the larger ILLC community. Even the candidates who started their PhDs under difficult pandemic constraint could meet their peers in regular intervals around various (online) social events. The PhD council deserves a high praise for making the new PhD candidates of the ILLC feel welcome and for keeping the community together during difficult times. There is, however, one important point that deserves attention. Some PhD candidates of the ILLC have joint appointments with other institutes and universities, thus, they regularly work at different locations (such as the CWI). These PhD candidates do not have much contact with the PhD candidates whose main work space is at the ILLC and, as a result, they often feel isolated.

Recommendation 6: The PhD council and the PhD management team should pay special attention to the PhD candidates whose main/part-time workspace is outside of the ILLC to help them feel part of the ILLC community.

Covid-19 related issues

Especially the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic was very difficult for some of the PhD candidates due to strict measures such as online education and lockdowns. Working from home has them feeling completely isolated. Due to the increased workload of the staff members, some of the PhD candidates could not meet their supervisors as often as they used to, and some group meetings and seminars had to be postponed or cancelled. All these unexpected changes in the work environment hindered the academic progress of some of the PhD candidates. For some of the candidates it has been very difficult to have a healthy work-life balance. However, thanks to the efforts of the PhD council, the management team, and supervisors, many of the negative impacts of the pandemic on PhD candidates have been alleviated and most of the candidates stated that they have been dealing well with the difficulties around the pandemic. However, the uncertainties around the pandemic and quickly changing rules still seem to be a source of additional stress and anxiety. Both the PVC and the PhD candidates acknowledge that the ILLC has been very extremely supportive throughout the pandemic. This is why we are hesitant to write any recommendations here. The following should be taken as a reminder of good practices that help keep the PhD candidates motivated.

Recommendation 7: The PhD council should organize regular social events to enhance the feeling of community among the PhD candidates. They should pay special attention to the attendance of the PhD candidates who started the programme in the midst of the pandemic and to those with joint appointments for the reasons mentioned in section Community Building. Group meetings and seminars should continue as much as possible and the supervisors should regularly check up on their students. Finally, the PhD management team should make sure that the PhD candidates know whom to reach out if they feel overwhelmed.

Amsterdam, 21 January 2022
Aybüke Özgün
on behalf of the PVC 2021