

ILLC PHD PROGRAMME EVALUATION 2023

Institute for Logic, Language and Computation — University of Amsterdam

1. 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 through an online questionnaire. The PVC questionnaire addresses all kinds of aspects of a PhD project, including organizational 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 the topics listed above can be discussed in more detail during these meetings.

The PVC of 2023 consisted of Sandro Pezzelle (chair), Gregor Behnke, Marianna Girlando, and Karolina Krzyżanowska. Out of the 62 PhD candidates affiliated with the Institute, 46 were invited to fill in the questionnaire (the other 16 were not invited due to temporary inactivity or employment elsewhere). The committee received 42 completed questionnaires and interviewed 19 PhD candidates. This number includes all candidates in their second year, 8 in total, and other 11 candidates that were invited by the PVC for interviews. The interviews took place between May 23 and May 26, 2023.

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 whole ILLC community.

2. Findings and recommendations

Based on the responses to the questionnaire and our meetings with individual PhD candidates, we believe that the ILLC 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.

At the same time, the role of the ILLC PVC is to identify the aspects on which further improvements can be made and propose recommendations on how to achieve them. The recommendations for this year can be grouped into **six main themes**, which we discuss in detail below.

2.1 Social cohesion and work environment. With the COVID-19 pandemic behind us, many of the issues that emerged in previous years relating to its long-lasting effects appear to have less and less impact on the social cohesion and daily work experience of ILLC PhD candidates. In this sense, both the return to in-person activities and meetings

and the renewed enthusiasm of the PhD council in organizing social events and meeting opportunities have helped a lot. However, a few critical issues have emerged this year that we fear could damage social cohesion. We recommend making all necessary efforts to improve them and ensure a healthy work environment.

1. **Disparities among PhD candidates.** Quite a few doctoral students complain of disparity compared to their peers. This perceived disparity may have various causes, such as their affiliation (Faculty of Science or Humanities), or their type of contract (employment or scholarship) and corresponding rights and duties. This leads these candidates to feel as if they have a different status than others, e.g., to feel like “outsiders” within the ILLC, or to experience confusion regarding their teaching obligations and financial matters, e.g., how much and what funding they have available and what can or cannot be reimbursed depending on the funding source.

Recommendation: It is crucial that all ILLC PhD candidates feel equally part of the ILLC PhD Programme and the Institute. We recommend: (1) making efforts to equalize rules, duties, opportunities, and, wherever possible, financial aspects among PhD candidates; (2) strengthening the activities and opportunities for doctoral students from across the whole Institute to meet and feel part of the same community, despite the inevitable differences that may exist. This recommendation is primarily addressed to the ILLC and the ILLC PhD Programme’s heads.

2. **Little sense of belonging.** A few PhD candidates complain of not being part of any group, or of being part of one that is little active or engaging. This is a problem since not feeling actively belonging to a community of colleagues and peers can increase loneliness and detachment.

Recommendation: It is crucial that every PhD candidate feels part of some group or community within the ILLC. We recommend that particular attention be paid to this aspect and efforts to ensure that everyone is actively invited and involved in lab and unit activities; for example, by having lunch together. Supervisors and members of each unit obviously have a key role in this. We therefore address this recommendation particularly to them.

3. **Gender inequalities.** Some PhD candidates who self-identify as female report being more frequently than their male colleagues asked to organize events and to give presentations that are primarily meant to promote the Institute (so these are not opportunities for the candidates to receive meaningful feedback). This causes an increased workload for female PhD candidates. At the same time, we have observed a certain level of resentment from male PhD candidates, some of whom complained that they were not being given an equal opportunity to present their work. We have also received reports of male PhD candidates being more frequently invited to *participate* in social activities such as lunches with visiting scholars than their female colleagues. The candidates voiced the concern that this is done to promote an outward appearance of equality, without any genuine concern for internal inequality.

Recommendation: We want to raise everyone’s awareness on this point. Equality is an important issue for the ILLC. While ensuring that traditionally underrepresented groups are more visible at various events helps to promote diversity, inviting *only*

female PhD students *by default* might also lead to overburdening them and may even hurt their careers. Event organizers should pay attention to the gender ratio, both among speakers and among those involved in organizational tasks. Since ensuring gender balance is not always a trivial matter, we have raised the issue with the Diversity Committee which will prepare guidelines on this topic.

4. **Social safety.** While no PhD candidate reported feeling unsafe *in* the institute, the PVC was made aware of the fact that this is not always the case *outside* of the institute (e.g., at conferences or research visits). Some PhD students highlighted the lack of guidance and uncertainty about where to seek support when facing undesirable behavior in an academic context.

Recommendation: Social safety is important for the ILLC, and for UvA as a whole, that is why there are confidential advisers appointed by UvA, and there is a dedicated ILLC PhD coach who could be contacted by those experiencing any form of undesirable behavior. However, PhD candidates may not know they can also receive support concerning issues they experience in academic contexts outside of the institute. We would like to encourage the Programme Director and the supervisors to make sure that PhD candidates are aware of the support they can receive if they feel their safety or well-being is threatened, and to regularly check on their supervisees, especially during their extended stays outside of the Institute.

2.2 Supervision, feedback, and evaluation. Overall, our PhD candidates expressed satisfaction with the supervision and feedback received from their supervising teams. The positive experience is attributed to dedicated guidance and constructive input, fostering a supportive environment for academic growth and research excellence. At the same time, there are a few PhD candidates who struggle due to irregular communication with their supervisor(s) or unclear arrangements. Below, we report two general issues for which we have collected dissatisfaction and complaints, prompting us to recommend the necessary actions to be taken.

1. **Concerns with milestones and official assessments.** Some PhD candidates voice concerns about the perceived lack of seriousness/formality and consistency in the handling of official assessment moments, like the 9-month report and the yearly evaluation. Furthermore, there is ambiguity regarding the expectations for these reports and evaluation meetings, leading to varied interpretations among candidates and supervisors. Some candidates report experiencing divergent expectations, contributing to a sense of dissatisfaction and unclarity in the assessment process.

Recommendation: Our recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of crucial evaluation moments include clarifying guidelines and fostering uniformity in expectations. We believe this will address reported concerns of inconsistency and ambiguity, promoting a more straightforward and equitable assessment process. Specifically, we would like to urge the supervisors to clearly explain their expectations about the 9-month report at the very beginning of the PhD candidate's contract, to avoid misunderstandings and surprises.

2. **Lack of a “progress bar”.** (Note that this point was raised also last year and has been brought up again this year). Sometimes PhD students are unsure whether

they are on track. Some students said they would like to have a kind of “progress bar” where they can see how far they are from completing the PhD.

Recommendation: Supervisors can and should be explicit about how they see the progress of the student and reassure the student if they believe they are doing well. If they expect a certain number of publications by the end of the PhD, they should be clear about that as well. We also recommend that at least one person within each supervising team confidently assesses the progress of the student. Finally, we encourage supervisors to have more check-in moments and open discussions on how things are going. Official assessments and yearly evaluations are certainly a good moment for this, but they should not be the only occasions to provide feedback.

2.3 Mental health issues. The mental health of our PhD candidates is generally good and better than in previous years. In this sense, overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic and its medium- and long-term effects has certainly played a positive role. Furthermore, the growing awareness of all the members of the Institute towards this aspect and the efforts made to improve it have shown positive results. We are glad to note this. There is still a general issue that deserves everyone's attention, and for which we propose recommendations for further improvement.

- 1. Publication and academic pressure.** Some PhD candidates report stress due to the pressure of having to publish, the fear of having their articles rejected, the comparison with the performance and achievements of colleagues, and the anxiety of not being selected for internships and other research and work opportunities. Although we are aware that most of these issues are more due to the academic environment than to reasons inherent to our Institute, we nevertheless urge its members to pay particular attention to these aspects and try to resolve or mitigate them whenever possible.

Recommendation: We recommend two key measures to support our PhD candidates. First, we encourage supervisors to provide constant advice and support, addressing challenges like rejections, peer pressure, internship stress, and publication pressure. Second, we recommend the PhD Programme Director organize a peer-to-peer tutorial or workshop focused on internships, offering insights into the application process and procedures (including dealing with interviews and possible rejections). We believe that these two recommendations, when implemented together, can contribute to alleviating the reported stress, to make it more manageable and less overwhelming for our candidates.

2.4 Teaching Assistant duties. Overall, the procedure for assigning teaching assistant duties to PhD candidates (TA allocation) appears to function well; however, there are a few specific issues regarding TA obligations that demand special attention. It is imperative to address these concerns to ensure that all PhD candidates feel content about their TA responsibilities, maintain a reasonable workload, and establish clear and transparent agreements. Resolving these issues is crucial for fostering a positive and equitable experience for all involved in the teaching assignment process.

- 1. Missing or unclear TA agreements.** The TA agreement between course coordinators and PhD candidates frequently remains unresolved before the start of a course, leading to confusion, mismatches in expectations, and cases of

overworking (some PhD candidates reported they spent 30-40 hours per week for their TA obligations). We note that this issue is especially pronounced when the course coordinator is the PhD candidate's supervisor. Moreover, there tends to be ambiguity regarding the specific duties expected from PhD candidates in a course, as well as a lack of clarity on tasks deemed appropriate for a TA in general (e.g., is lecturing, preparing materials, or supervising students' projects something that can be assigned to PhD TAs?). Addressing these challenges is essential to establish transparent expectations and ensure a balanced workload for all parties involved.

Recommendation: We strongly recommend two key measures to enhance the effectiveness of the TA assignment process. Firstly, TA agreements must be finalized *before* the beginning of courses. This recommendation extends to both course coordinators and the PhD Programme, emphasizing the need for timely reminders and a streamlined process. Additionally, PhD candidates are encouraged to play an active role in seeking and reminding their course coordinators about completing TA agreements. Secondly, there is a need for clearer guidelines from the Programme to course coordinators and PhD candidates regarding what is reasonable to ask of a PhD candidate serving as a TA. We believe that establishing transparent expectations will mitigate misunderstandings and prevent mismatches in workload and responsibilities.

- 2. Confusion on what counts as a “teaching assignment”.** Some PhD candidates report a lack of clarity or confusion regarding what officially counts as a teaching assignment. While TAing for a course is clearly and unanimously recognized as such, some candidates wonder if this is also the case for (co-)supervising student projects or theses. This sometimes generates confusion and wrong or misleading expectations, and we urge that actions be taken to address this issue.

Recommendation: We strongly recommend that the Programme makes it clear from the outset what counts as a “teaching assignment” for PhD candidates, including what the required and optional tasks are. Furthermore, we recommend providing even clearer guidance on the supervision of projects and theses. The introductory meeting can be a good opportunity to clarify all this and prevent confusion. If it is administratively and financially possible, the Programme could also consider introducing a system to reward the time spent on thesis supervision and make it count as teaching (TA) hours.

2.5 Reimbursements. Within the administrative and organizational aspects, something that emerged very often in our interviews, and which creates confusion and insecurity among PhD candidates, has to do with reimbursements for travel expenses (conferences, research visits, etc.). Several PhD candidates complain that they do not know how much they are entitled to each year (both from the ILLC's budget and individual projects' budget), where the funds they have come from, what they can get reimbursed (for example, if there is a uniform policy on reimbursing meals), and what the possible and preferred procedures are (ask money upfront, be reimbursed at the end, book everything via the booking system, etc.). Furthermore, some doctoral students report discrepancies with their colleagues regarding the information they have. We believe that this confusion is unpleasant and that it is necessary to reduce or resolve doubts in this regard.

Recommendation: We recommend enhancing clarity in onboarding procedures and maintaining it throughout the academic years, with particular attention to tailoring the information based on the specific funding situation of each PhD candidate. Supervisors should also be given this information so that they can have answers to their doctoral students' inquiries regarding these issues. This will ensure a more informed and transparent experience for all, aligning expectations with individual circumstances.

2.6 Outreach of the annual PVC report. We conclude with some final recommendations on how to ensure that the present report reaches all the involved parties and that the recommendations contained in it are available to everyone, to make the biggest impact on the PhD Programme.

Recommendation: We recommend that this report be disseminated and made available to all involved parties. In this sense, we find that organizing a lunch with all the supervisors of PhD candidates is an excellent idea, which must certainly be reiterated and maintained. Furthermore, we propose that the report be made available on the *Promovendi* page so that it is more easily found by supervisors and candidates when needed. Finally, we think it is a very good idea to discuss it collectively with supervisors and PhD candidates (for example, in an ILLC current affairs meeting), to ensure that its recommendations are received and discussed, and perhaps updated and extended. In this way, the report can become a dynamic and participatory tool to improve the PhD Programme collectively and inclusively.

Amsterdam, 19 December 2023

Sandro Pezzelle, on behalf of the PVC 2023