

PVC Report 2025

1 Introduction

The ILLC PhD Programme eValuation Committee (PVC) monitors the quality of the ILLC's PhD Programme, the working conditions, and well-being of its PhD candidates. 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 a wide range of aspects of a PhD candidate's experience on the programme, 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 the PVC members. Candidates who are in their second year are invited by default. All of the topics listed above can be discussed in more detail during these meetings, or more, if the candidate so wishes. Out of the 74 PhD candidates affiliated with the Institute at the time, 64 were invited to fill out the questionnaire. The other 10 were not invited due to temporary inactivity or employment elsewhere, notably the CWI (the PVC does not monitor the quality of the PhD Programme of the CWI). The committee received 54 completed questionnaires and interviewed 21 PhD candidates. This number includes all candidates in their second year, 16 in total, and another 3 candidates who were invited by the PVC based on their questionnaires. In addition two candidates requested an interview themselves. The interviews took place between April 28 and May 23, 2025 in person and in 2 cases due to exceptional circumstances online. The PVC of 2025 consisted of Gregor Behnke (chair), Marloes Geboers, Martha Lewis, and Yde Venema. Below, we present our main findings and recommendations based on the PhD questionnaires, subsequent interviews, and internal deliberations.

2 Overall Outcome

We observed that almost all PhD candidates are generally happy, satisfied with the ILLC's PhD programme, and receive excellent supervision and education at the ILLC. Supervisors meet regularly with their candidates and provide good feedback and guidance, both in terms of research and career development. Most candidates perform well academically, are confident to complete their PhD, and appreciate the ILLC's vibrant and inter-disciplinary atmosphere. We did not find any substantial or systemic issues in the ILLC's PhD programme.

3 Reports on Individual Topics

In addition to our overall very positive findings, we report on a number of individual topics that have been discussed with PhD candidates during the PVC process.

3.1 Flex Desks

The ILLC recently introduced a flex desk system for PhD candidates in LAB42. A substantial majority of PhD candidates is happy with the change to flex desks and even uses it to their advantage. There are some candidates who would prefer fixed desks but are also content with the new system. Only very few candidates are generally dissatisfied. This mostly stems from practical issues surrounding the flex desk's introduction.

For example, there are currently no lockers for overnight storage available – this will be resolved starting in August. There have been instances where the basic desk equipment (keyboard, mouse)

disappeared or was not present in the morning, making the desk not ready for use. On the other hand, some candidates leave their private items on their flex desk, effectively marking it as “their desk” and thus making the desk unavailable to others. Some candidates do not register their usage of desks in the flex desk system, especially if they use the same desk every day and that desk is not a “coveted” desk. Occupancy in the offices in LAB42 is generally quite low, especially the large room housing up to eight PhD candidates is mostly empty.

Recommendation: Practical issues (lockers, missing equipment, non-registration of desks) should be resolved. The ILLC’s management should consider measures to increase the occupancy of the PhD rooms – also as a measure to increase social cohesion and sense of belonging (see Section 3.8) Desks should not be occupied by private items. The management team could also consider providing PhD candidates with alternative options to individualise their office environments (e.g. individual cupboards, although we also acknowledge potential issues here).

3.2 Skills Courses

PhD candidates are required to take a set of skills courses as part of their PhD trajectory. While satisfaction with these courses increased from last year (PhD candidates were e.g. very happy with the presentation course), there are still substantial issues with some of the courses. Notably, the organisation of the “Mastering your PhD” is too rigid and does not take into account that PhD candidates have obligations of their own – e.g. teaching and conference visits – that may conflict with this course. Secondly, the writing course (currently offered as a Coursera course) has too specific a focus, being mostly targeted towards PhD candidates at the Faculty of Science and was described as not helpful for candidates at the Faculty of Humanities. A more minor third point was that some candidates would appreciate additional optional courses very specific to their research, for example in using the Snellius cluster.

Recommendation: The complaints about the “Mastering your PhD” should be made to the Faculty and the Dean as they are responsible for this course. Overall the course organisation must become more flexible. For example, missing one meeting should not automatically mean that a candidate needs to re-do the course at a later point in time. Creating flexibility here will also prevent instances where PhD candidates finish the Mastering your PhD-course very late in their trajectory. The Faculty’s PhD council could also be contacted to take up the issue.

For the other courses, we recommend that the units review their current content. If appropriate, a subset of the units could and should make a joint proposal for a replacement of some of the skills courses, especially the writing course, with content more appropriate for their PhD candidates. Potential provision of optional specific courses could also be organised by units.

3.3 Financial Information

We observed cases in which PhD candidates were not aware of the financial setting surrounding their research and employment. This e.g. pertains to the funding available for conference visits, research stays, and summer schools. There was also unclarity surrounding the financial implications (e.g. salary and duration of employment) and settlements for internships and research visits. Despite improvements to the information provided by the ILLC over the last year, not all PhD candidates are aware of this information. Some did not correctly understand it, or were confused by additional information e.g. from their faculty or colleagues and ultimately left doubt about the rules applicable to them.

Recommendation: PhD supervisors should foster an open atmosphere also surrounding financial matters. Candidates should be encouraged to (1) consult the information available on the ILLC’s websites ([PhD](#), [ILLC](#) and [Wiki](#)) and (2) contact the ILLC’s office in case of doubt. Generally supervisors should ensure that PhD candidates will seek help and advice if any issue or unclarity arises. Supervisors themselves should also ask for clarifications if in doubt. Supervisors should take the effort and educate themselves about the financial and budgetary rules of the ILLC especially surrounding internships and research visits. As an additional measure, such information may be given at the supervisors’ lunch. An introduction to financial information should be included into the ILLC office’s on-boarding procedure for new PhD candidates.

As a general rule, it is from the ILLC’s perspective – within reasonable limits – acceptable if a PhD candidates visits a conference without having a paper to present. However, final decisions always rest with budget holders.

3.4 Supervision

We observed a few minor issues in supervision that prompt us to make the following recommendations.

Recommendation:

PhD candidates should have regular meetings with their supervisors; depending on the nature of the project this can be anything between various meetings weekly and one meeting monthly. Every candidate must have two supervisors, both of which should typically be staff members of the ILLC or at least the UvA. The involvement of the second supervisor can vary, but they should be able and available to meet the student on a regular basis and take over the main supervisor's task if the need arises.

Under regular circumstances, the second supervisor should be appointed once the PhD candidate submits her or his 9 month report. The second supervisors must in any case be appointed before the one year evaluation meeting of the PhD candidate. The director of the ILLC's PhD programme should enforce these requirements strictly.

The PhD candidate's main supervisor must be present at the candidate's first day of work. The supervisors should generally respond to written material in a timely manner and if not possible inform their PhD candidates. Supervisors should provide PhD candidates with feedback on their overall progression towards completing their PhD. We noticed that for some PhD candidates it is not enough to provide feedback on this item only during the yearly evaluation meetings. Supervisors should clearly communicate their expectations for a completed PhD and how they think their candidates are progressing towards it. PhD candidates may feel uneasy to start a discussion about this topic. Supervisors should – as appropriate, but somewhat regularly – allocate time in supervision meetings to discuss these higher level issues and take the lead in discussing them. Generally supervisors should ensure that supervision meetings discuss more than the day-to-day business.

3.5 9 Month Report

We observed a few cases where PhD candidates were not clear about the content, requirements, and procedure around the 9 month report.

Recommendation: Clearly, supervisors should take the lead here and inform their PhD candidates as soon and as transparently as possible.

3.6 Teaching

We did not observe substantial issues related to teaching. Some PhD candidates were not aware of the new rules surrounding supervision of theses, and in particular how thesis supervision can be used to replace standard TA duties on a taught course. In almost all cases a TA agreement was made between the PhD candidate and the course coordinator. The agreement also served its purpose.

3.7 PhD Defense

Obtaining a date for the PhD defense can be very stressful. The fact that there are only two locations available and that these are not available during summer is especially problematic.

Recommendation: The ILLC might lobby for, e.g., introducing a third location for defenses at Science Park or for a more efficient use of the available facilities (e.g. allow for a third defense on some days and for defenses to take place during the summer)

3.8 Social Cohesion

We found that several PhD candidates felt a lack of social cohesion within the ILLC and sometimes reported a feeling of loneliness. This is notably made more problematic by the physical split of the institute into multiple locations. Some candidates were unfortunately not aware of general social activities of the ILLC, like the ILLC colloquium. PhD candidates welcome that the PhD council's social activities are starting again.

Recommendation: The ILLC leadership should work to resolve the split housing situation. To help intermingling in the meantime, residents of LAB42 might be encouraged to have more meetings in SP107. Supervisors should encourage their PhD candidates to participate in ILLC-wide social events

like the ILLC colloquium and current affairs meetings. The ILLC's units should have their own regular social events, e.g., together with a seminar or the like to foster communication within the units. These events should be specifically designed as social events and PhD candidates should be encouraged to participate. Some units already do this, but we would recommend this to become practice in all units.

3.9 The PVC as a Contact Point

Following last year's recommendations, we reiterate that the PVC can also serve as an independent point of contact for PhD candidates, e.g., in cases of conflicts with their PhD supervisors.

Recommendation: PhD candidates should be made aware of this opportunity. For example, they could be told about this at their onboarding and during events of the PhD council or the ILLC's CAM.

3.10 Questionnaire

Several changes were recommended to the questionnaire sent to all PhD candidates. Notably questions on housing should be added.