

Response to the ILLC PhD Programme Evaluation Report 2024

Formulated by the MT under directorship of Robert van Rooij

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The institute would like to thank the members of the 2024 Programme eValuation Committee (PVC) consisting of Gregor Behnke (chair), Beste Kamali, Davide Beraldo, and Franziska Jahnke for their detailed report. The report¹ contains insightful reflections about the overall quality of the ILLC PhD programme, as well as several recommendations addressed to the ILLC management but also to the supervisors. In this document we will respond in written form to the major recommendations addressed to the PhD programme director and the ILLC management. The recommendations to the supervisors will be communicated and discussed during the next supervision lunch (planned for May-June 2025).

Supervision

Recommendations

1. The ILLC has a comprehensive code of practice on supervisory activities available on the ILLC website (<https://phdprogramme.illc.uva.nl/Info-for-Supervisors/code>). Some of the recommendations we make below are already included there. We recommend that this document is made more visible and staff members are encouraged to consult it more actively and frequently. For example, a reminder may be communicated at the start of new projects to all involved staff members. Starting PhD candidates must be included in this communication so they can set realistic expectations and take action as needed in case the code is not being followed. Supervisors should be encouraged to actively discuss the code of practice with their PhD candidates. We recommend

¹The full PVC report is downloadable from:
<https://phdprogramme.illc.uva.nl/current-candidates/support/pvc/>

a review of the code by the management team at suitable intervals, as it might become outdated. If it is concluded that a revision is needed, sending out a questionnaire tapping all of the permanent staff's opinion should spark increased attention to the code in addition to updating the quality standards in supervision.

2. We recommend that the supervisors (continue to) have regular weekly meetings with PhD candidates based on a clear schedule. Fewer meetings are acceptable if that is the candidate's wish. Similarly, PhD candidates should not be required to meet more than once a week with their supervisor, unless they desire this themselves. If the supervisor has the means to do so, it is recommended to tailor the meeting frequency to the PhD candidate's preference and needs.
3. Supervisors should provide feedback (e.g. on a paper draft, talks, applications) in a timely manner, which often means before the next weekly meeting. If this is not possible, this should be communicated to the PhD candidate at the earliest opportunity including a timeline on when feedback can be expected.
4. In case two supervisors of one PhD candidate assume a division of responsibilities, this should be done exhaustively covering all aspects of advising listed below, and the division should be communicated clearly to the candidate. Based on PhD candidate reports, the following three components of advice are the likeliest to fall through the cracks in case of less thorough division of responsibility among supervisors:
 - (a) Feedback on written material
 - (b) Advice on conference / publication venues
 - (c) Advice on career prospects

As the most time consuming of the three, we recommend that feedback on written material is clearly associated with a supervisor each time it is needed, both to create more accountability and to avoid overlaps. There are multiple ways of reaching this clarity. Supervision teams can share the responsibility based on topic, genre (paper vs. talk), stage of writing (early draft, later draft, revision) among other parameters.

5. Large groups with several PhD candidates should have an internal support structure. Having many PhD candidates cannot be an excuse for giving them little support. In case a group has more PhD candidates

than the supervisor can effectively handle, the supervisor should create clear arrangements for supervision and feedback via PostDocs, associated staff members and co-supervisors, or senior PhD candidates.

6. Candidates frequently run into deadline issues leading to overworking before paper submission deadlines. In some cases, this is due to bad time management on the part of the supervisor - by responding late to requests for feedback, or requesting last minute changes. We recommend a more proactive approach in supervising around deadlines.
7. The Teaching and Supervision Plan (TSP) and the annual reviews provide texts and processes that greatly benefit the candidates by giving them clarity on their performance and expectations. Supervisors should make sure to clearly communicate their expectations and what candidates can expect from them in return when discussing the TSP. This should be done with due diligence.

Response The ILLC/PhD management shares the concerns expressed in the PVC report with respect to the individual cases where the ILLC standards for supervision were not met. In the Fall 2024, this issue has been discussed in a series of meetings between representatives of the ILLC MT and the PVC committee; and later also with the PhD council. After these meetings the ILLC MT addressed some of the issues with a number of supervisors. Furthermore, since 2024 a link to the Code of Practice for ILLC supervisors, including a description of their role and responsibilities, is included in a message to the main supervisor at the start of every new PhD project. We will from now on (i) include the PhD candidate to the recipients of this message with an invite to discuss these guidelines openly within the supervision team; and (ii) include an explicit discussion on the role of supervisors in the PhD trajectory we will organise for 1st year PhD candidates starting from September 2025. Furthermore, in the next supervisor lunch we will further discuss the specific recommendations to supervisors contained in the PVC report and decide whether the guidelines on the ILLC webpage need revision.

Skill courses

Recommendations

1. Discussing with the FNWI ways to reduce ILLC PhD candidates' course load. We understand the CWI PhD candidates only need to

take one skills course. The observations we include above may be used to demonstrate the numerous complaints with the current skills course offer and requirement.

2. If a structural change cannot be negotiated with the FNWI, we recommend that the current practice of exemption be generalized. For example, all candidates that have passed e.g. 18 or 24 months of their PhD could be exempted from the “Mastering your PhD” course. Another course of action could be granting a certain number of exemptions across the board, given the supervisor’s approval.
3. PhD candidates should be made widely aware of the possibility of exemptions (along with any modifications in policy). Many candidates reported not knowing about this option and stressing out about fitting in all of the required skills courses despite conflicts, and simultaneously wasting their time on courses they no longer needed.
4. In addition to improvements in exemption policy and scheduling, alternative sources of satisfying a skills course requirement could be identified. For example, a certain level of writing accomplishment could satisfy the writing course. Courses from the Professional Skills Learning Trajectory, which primarily teach after-studies skills for possible careers, could be an independently interesting alternative.
5. Note that the skills courses are still considered helpful when taken at the right time. It should be discussed with the FNWI to improve the administration of the course “Mastering your PhD”. The current haphazard scheduling and strict attendance requirement appears counterproductive. In terms of scheduling, PhD candidates must be able to take this course in their first year when it is most needed. Strict attendance should at least be replaced by missing one session by permission.
6. The ILLC should consider offering a more specialised writing course. This could be held online, or in-house, ideally separated by faculty (i.e. one course for the FNWI and one for the FwG candidates each tailored to the respective research topics).
7. Some candidates want to improve their teaching qualifications. Skills courses related to teaching (e.g. the ones from the TLC) should be given more visibility.

Response We are aware that in previous years the organisation of “Mastering your PhD” has been highly problematic. Since 2024/25 things have been largely improved. We will evaluate the situation again during the next PVC round and if the main issues have not been resolved we will take action. As for the Skill Courses organised by ILLC (including Academic Writing), we will review the offerings next year, and when doing so we will take these recommendations into account.

Desk policy and communications about it

Recommendations

1. When the management is considering substantial changes to desk policy (e.g. flex desks instead of fixed ones), the plans and their consequences should be communicated to PhD candidates from a central source and in a timely manner.
2. On an individual basis, the decisions to move a candidate’s workplace should be communicated openly and as early as possible. Candidates should be given at least two weeks of warning ahead of their workplace being relocated.
3. The ILLC’s management might consider how the flex-desk policy affects the coherence of the research groups in terms of seating for candidates with similar research topics.

Response The new desk allocation policy in LAB42 was discussed and devised together with the PhD council at the periodic meetings ILLC management has with the council. It took a while to come up with a plan because for a time it was unclear what was allowed by the faculty. Once the plan was made it still needed to be implemented in the ILLC website. This period and the communication during this period could have been more structured.

In the case of individual re-assignment of desks a period of two weeks notice is reasonable and will be communicated to the ILLC office.

The flex-desk policy is up for evaluation in the next meeting between the ILLC management and the PhD council. How this policy might affect coherence of the research groups will then be discussed.

Confidential Contact Point(s)

Recommendations

1. The overall procedure for obtaining help in these situations should be made more clear to PhD candidates. We would like to mention the most important items here.
 - (a) Cases of inappropriate behaviour can be reported to the FNWT's confidential contact point who will then involve the ILLC if necessary.
 - (b) Issues surrounding supervision can be discussed with the ILLC's director or with the management team in general.
 - (c) Other issues can be discussed with the management team.
2. It seems that sometimes these contact points are perceived as too remote or "too official" for students to initiate communication. We recommend that the PVC's role as a first-contact point is revived for PhD candidates to report issues. This contact point then can and must involve the appropriate people, based on the issue raised, while not attempting to solve the issue. This should not create a separate structure of confidential contact points, but supplement the existing structure so that it becomes easier for candidates to access the assistance they need. After discussion with the director of the ILLC's PhD program, we note that:
 - (a) The original purpose of the PVC was exactly to fill this role as a permanent group of staff members that PhD candidates can contact in case of conflicts.
 - (b) The PVC at some point in the past stopped fulfilling this role.
 - (c) Given willingness inside the current PVC, we recommend reviving this role (see Section 3 on proposed changes to the structure of the PVC)

Response Following the recommendation, the PVC has been included again in the list of possible contact points within ILLC for discussion of issues related to supervision or to any other aspects of the PhD trajectory (see ILLC PhD programme webpage). As for the lack of clarity concerning the procedures, starting from next academic year, there will be a more structured programme for the first year PhD candidates with regular meetings with the PhD management, in which the PhD programme regulations and facilities (now only presented once during the introductory meetings and available on the ILLC PhD webpage) will be addressed more thoroughly. The expectation is further that via these regular meetings, potential issues

and conflicts can be identified and handled by the PhD management in a timely manner.

Organization of the PVC

Recommendations

1. Have 2 year staggered terms - this way we guarantee that 2 old members already have experience in conducting interviews and reporting while 2 new members are trained. This way, the experience inside the PVC is not lost.
2. Require that at least half of the PVC has supervised or are currently supervising PhD candidates at the ILLC, so that PVC members are aware of the procedural aspects of the ILLC's PhD program.
3. If there is agreement to revive a first-contact role (see 2.4), make it clear that this is a role requiring an "open door" for PhD candidates year round.
4. Recruit new PVC members by sparking interest and inviting applications at the appropriate seasonal instalment of the Current Affairs Meeting.

Response Thank you for the recommendations. All these aspects will be taken into account by the ILLC management when recruiting new PVC members (and in fact have been taken into account when putting together the PVC in 2025).