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Co-tutelles in European universities: concept, aims and implementation

EUA-CDE Thematic Peer Group Report

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Introduction

This report is the result of the work of the EUA-CDE Thematic Peer Group (TPG) on "Co-tutelles and Joint Doctorates". EUA-CDE established this working group to address a topic of growing interest among European universities and to discuss the different approaches these institutions have taken to co-tutelles. The group, composed of representatives from 23 universities in 15 European countries, explored why universities engage in the challenging process of facilitating exchange and mobility of doctoral candidates through co-tutelle arrangements and the practical issues involved. At the same time, the group aimed to share good practices that could be transferable to other contexts.

The following sections of this report focus on the relevance of the so called *co-tutelles de thèse* and present the different steps leading to co-tutelle arrangements based on the practices and experiences of the participants in this group. At the same time, common challenges related to this type of cooperation and possible solutions will be identified.

The text focuses in particular on the practical dimension of the introduction of co-tutelles but also relates to the potential of co-tutelles as a strategic tool. It serves as a source of inspiration and reflection for everybody who is tasked with introducing such schemes within their own institution.

The setting

Co-tutelles de thèse originated in France in the 1990s. A decree of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research of 18 January 1994[1] created the legal basis for international co-tutelles.

When this type of cooperation was launched, it aimed to establish and develop scientific cooperation between French and foreign institutions by promoting the international mobility of doctoral candidates.

This new procedure had several features that were already quite similar to the way co-tutelles are currently organised in many European countries, namely:

- each doctorate in co-tutelle takes place within the framework of an agreement linking two partner higher education institutions from two different countries;
- each doctorate in co-tutelle leads to a unique, mutually recognised doctoral thesis and defence;
- doctoral candidates under co-tutelle agreements carry out their work under the supervision and responsibility of a supervisor in each of the two countries involved;
- the preparation time for the doctoral thesis is divided in alternating stays between the two partner institutions.

Over the last two decades, universities have paid increasing attention to the issue of co-tutelles, which has led to a rapid diffusion across European universities. Hereby, co-tutelles have been adapted to national contexts, for instance – where it is legally possible – by not limiting this instrument to collaborations with international partners. EUA-CDE has also contributed to the spread of co-tutelles by organising research activities and events such as surveys, workshops, and peer group discussions related to collaboration on doctoral education, in which the pros and cons of co-tutelles have been analysed.

1 Ministère français de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche, *Arrêté du 18 janvier 1994 relatif à la création d'une procédure de cotutelle de thèse entre établissements d'enseignement supérieur français et étranger*, Retrieved 22 November 2021, from: https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000000180336.

In 2019, EUA-CDE organised a Thematic Workshop[2] entitled "Inter-institutional collaboration in doctoral education" at Vrije Universitet Amsterdam. At this Thematic Workshop, members identified the design and implementation of co-tutelle agreements (among other things) as a resource-intensive process but, at the same time, they considered co-tutelles as relevant tools for fostering collaboration between institutions at the international level.

In addition, EUA-CDE published in April 2022 a Europe-wide survey,[3] which shows that international mobility of doctoral candidates plays a key role in cooperation between universities. For example, 91% of the respondents to this survey classified the opportunity for doctoral candidates to gain experience of different professional, research and educational contexts as an important strategic priority for European universities, and 54% considered co-tutelles a priority at their institutions.

The Thematic Peer Group on Co-tutelles and Joint Doctorates built on both this recently gathered information and on earlier work carried out by the EUA-CDE in the framework of inter-institutional cooperation projects, not only at the European but also at the worldwide level.

In 2005, EUA carried out an EU project titled "Doctoral Programmes for the European Knowledge Society".[4] The report of this project addressed the role of joint doctoral programmes and discussed the "European doctorate",[5] recommending a further discussion on its added value in the context of internationalisation and a competitive European Higher Education Area and European Research Area.

The EUA-led projects CODOC[6] (Cooperation on Doctoral Education between Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe) (2012) and FRINDOC[7] (Framework for Internationalisation of Doctoral Education) (2015) aimed at strengthening the global cooperation of universities and contributing to their internationalisation capacity, by both enabling local research to meet local challenges and improve prospects for responding effectively to global ones, and highlighting some key principles for international doctoral education: i) access to good research environments with appropriate supervision and resources; ii)) engagement in international activities; iii) availability of sufficient institutional structures, and iv) facilitation of mobility for both doctoral candidates and staff.

The EUA-CDE also participated in the MIMIR and YEBO! projects. The former focused on developing innovation and research capacities in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, which is a key condition for doctoral education to be undertaken. The latter aimed at sharing experiences and providing the information and support needed to improve the internationalisation of doctoral education in South Africa.[8]

Along with EUA, other entities and institutions discussed co-tutelles and published reports with different types of information and guidelines. For example, in 2013, the Franco-Dutch Higher Education Network published a guide[9] providing a general overview of the regulations, procedures and other aspects of the implementation of co-tutelles between France and the Netherlands.

2 EUA Council for Doctoral Education, *2019 EUA-CDE Thematic Workshop*, https://eua.eu/events/30:2019-eua-cde-thematic-workshop.html.

3 Hasgall, A., Peneoasu, A. (2022), *Doctoral education in Europe: current developments and trends*, Retrieved 5 April 2022, from: https://eua-cde.org/reports-publications/1017:doctoral-education-in-europe-current-developments-and-trends.html, p.19.

4 European University Association (2005), *Doctoral programmes for the European Knowledge Society*, Retrieved 24 November 2021, from: https://eua-cde.org/reports-publications/32:doctoral-programmes-for-the-european-knowledge-society-report-on-the-eua-doctoral-programmes-project-2004-2005.html.

5 A European doctorate is a label appended in the diploma of a doctoral candidate approved by the home university, having: i) carried out a (small) part of the research work at another European university; ii) the manuscript of the thesis reviewed by two professors belonging to two other European countries/universities; iii) at least one member of the jury coming from another European country/university; iv) a part of the defence done in an EU official languages, different from the one(s) of the country where the thesis defence takes place. These principles were agreed during a meeting of the Confederation of European Rectors in Salamanca in 1991 and they are used informally. This label has no special legal value in the EU and it is the responsibility of universities to define criteria for delivering this title.

6 Ekman Jørgensen, T. (2012), *CODOC - Cooperation on Doctoral Education between Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe*, Retrieved 24 November 2021, from: https://eua-cde.org/reports-publications/44:codoc-cooperation-on-doctoral-education-between-africa,-asia,-latin-america-and-europe.html.

7 European University Association (2015), *Principles and Practices for International Doctoral Education*, Retrieved 25 November 2021, from: https://eua-cde.org/reports-publications/50:principles-and-practices-for-international-doctoral-education.html.

8 For more information, please visit: https://eua-cde.org/doctoral-education.html.

9 French-Dutch University Network (2013), *A guide to joint doctorates between France and the Netherlands*. Retrieved 30 November 2021, from: https://nlfr.eu/publications/.

Later, in 2015, the Research Committee of Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (UHR) decided to set up a working group to establish guidelines for joint degrees (that is, joint PhD programmes run together by the partner institution to provide a joint doctoral degree), and co-tutelle agreements at the doctoral level. The resulting document[10] explored how joint degrees and co-tutelle agreements are understood and practised at the national level and made several recommendations on what a joint awarding doctoral degree agreement should contain.

Recently, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) has also issued guidelines[11] to establish and develop joint research programmes between an IUA university and a foreign higher education institution. These guidelines aim to provide clarity for all stakeholders considering embarking on a collaborative programme between an IUA University and a foreign higher education institution. Such programmes lead to the awarding of a doctoral degree by the partner institutions in order to minimise the risks associated with joint programmes.

Also, in the context of the European University Initiative[12] launched in 2019, co-tutelles are increasingly seen as an important way to collaborate and strengthen strategic partnerships between universities involved in this cooperation network.

In addition to institutions' move towards internationalisation, some critical trends in the policy field favour the implementation of co-tutelle programmes. In this context, it is worth mentioning the current developments in the European Research Area (ERA), where the focus is on European mobility and exchange. Key funding programmes such as the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions (MSCA) aim to foster collaboration between universities and other stakeholders in training early-stage researchers, including doctoral candidates.

The analysis of the successes and shortcomings of all these initiatives towards doctoral collaboration as well as the funding opportunities provides useful insights into the role of co-tutelles in doctoral education and the necessary conditions for their sustainable development.

10 Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (2015), *Joint Degrees at the PhD Level: Introduction and Guidelines*. Retrieved 30 November 2021, from: https://www.uhr.no/_f/p1/i1bd6acae-1051-49f8-8464-b1bb18326bc7/joint_degrees_at_the_phd_level.pdf.

11 Irish Universities Association (2022), *Guidelines for Establishing Collaborative Research Degree Programmes*. Retrieved 6 January 2022, from: https://www.iua.ie/publications/iua-guidelines-for-establishing-collaborative-research-degree-programmes-2021/.

12 Council of the European Union (2021), *Conclusions on the European Universities Initiative - Building bridges between higher education, research, innovation and society: Paving the way for a new dimension in European higher education* 2021/C 221/03, ST/8658/2021/INIT. Retrieved 2 December 2021, from: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021XG0610%2802%29.

Conceptual considerations

The discussions in the working group showed the need to distinguish co-tutelles and joint doctorates. While in some countries these terms are clearly distinguished (e.g. in Portugal), group members report that in other countries these two terms are used interchangeably (e.g. in the Netherlands, Ireland or Belgium). Consequently, it is important to be aware of the potential confusion that can arise from misunderstandings related to using these terms and how this can be avoided.

To address this problem, working definitions for *co-tutelles de thèse* and joint doctorates have been developed by this Thematic Peer Group.

CO-TUTELLE

A co-tutelle refers to a doctorate of an individual doctoral candidate on which an agreement has been reached, usually between two higher education institutions and in general from different countries, and certified to award the doctoral degree in a given scientific area (not necessarily with the same titles) allowing the candidate to develop the doctoral research project in alternating stays at partner institutions. The doctoral candidate is supervised academically by at least two supervisors, one from each institution.

To formalise this type of cooperation, a written agreement is signed by the representatives of these institutions, setting out all the necessary conditions and legal norms to be followed in accordance with the regulations in force of the parties involved.

If the candidate accomplishes all degree requirements, including a single thesis and a single defence recognised by both institutions, the parties will award their respective degrees, either in the form of a single document or of two documents with explicit reference to each other. In this case, one of the awarded degree titles may then be used by the candidate by choice.

JOINT DOCTORATE

A joint doctorate refers to a joint doctoral programme for a cohort of doctoral candidates, which two or more institutions run together.

A joint doctorate promotes integrated international doctoral collaboration, benefitting from the education and research strengths of each partner and reducing the impact of the individual partner's shortcomings. It can act as a driver for the development of co-tutelle agreements or other forms of international collaboration (e.g. joint supervision of doctoral theses or double/multiple degrees, etc.) at the doctoral level.

Added value of co-tutelles

As shown below, co-tutelles require a considerable additional administrative effort for universities compared to "normal" doctorates, but they also offer many advantages. In this section, we briefly discuss the benefit of co-tutelles from the perspectives of both the doctoral candidates and the institution.

Originally designed to promote international collaboration, co-tutelles offer benefits for *doctoral candidates*. By conducting research in two or more countries, doctoral candidates under co-tutelle agreements learn about different academic environments and working styles, gaining the experience of carrying out research in various institutions.

In terms of research quality and impact, co-tutelles benefit the research project, especially when access to scientific expertise in another country is required to achieve the objectives successfully. In addition, they provide access to complementary research equipment and facilities (e.g. library databases, laboratory machines) at the partner institutions. Besides, the formal link with two supervisors from two different institutions provides an integrated educational and research experience in two research environments for the benefit of doctoral and post-doctoral international research.

Furthermore, upon successfully completing the co-tutelle, the candidate receives either a joint diploma or two explicitly related diplomas. This is not only a symbolic acknowledgment of the cooperation and a certification of the intercultural and international experience acquired, but also a third-party recognition of the scientific competences achieved by the candidate. This may also enhance the possibility of international recognition of the degree obtained.

Co-tutelles will also increase the opportunities for international networking and allow the doctoral candidates to establish personal contacts with other researchers (other than the supervisors) and help them expand future employment and research collaboration opportunities. It also gives candidates the opportunity to gain additional experience with different social, cultural and eventually linguistic environments, which may help improve their employability opportunities after graduation.

At the *institutional level*, co-tutelles also offer several advantages, as they can strengthen and deepen research collaboration and networks in the long term. Additionally, they can also be used as instruments for internationalisation at the doctoral level, as they promote the attraction of doctoral candidates from abroad, and promote international co-authoring of research papers.

Moreover, they can facilitate access to new funding opportunities, as success with key funding international calls (e.g. Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions) may be enhanced by previous joint experience of the partners.

Finally, co-tutelle agreements formalise a high level of cooperation between supervisors in different institutions and officially recognise them for their joint work, which may be beneficial for both the institutions and the individuals.

Co-tutelle drivers

As co-tutelles are initiated to respond to specific needs and interests, it is common for different groups within the institution to spearhead such an initiative. The Thematic Peer Group identified: a) supervisors; b) doctoral candidates; and c) academic leaders (e.g. rector, vice-rector, dean, etc.) as the main drivers of a co-tutelle process.

In most cases, the initiative comes from either the supervisor or the doctoral candidate. This fact supports the idea that it is often the content and form of a particular project and the involvement of the individual researcher in networks that lead to these collaborative doctoral activities. Supervisor-initiated co-tutelles often serve to take an already existing collaboration between senior researchers from different universities to a new level. When initiated by doctoral candidates (directly where it is possible, or through their supervisor), who want to familiarise themselves with the research of a leading research group in the field, co-tutelles can also mark the beginning of a new fruitful and lasting collaboration.

Although it is less common, the initiative for a co-tutelle agreement may also come from the academic leadership (rector, vice-rector, dean, etc.). In this case, the motivation for promoting co-tutelles is related to the willingness to develop a long-term and fruitful research collaboration with the partner university and to formalise institutional strategic relations.

Some political actors have identified co-tutelles as important tools for the internationalisation of their academic systems, and they provide financial incentives which reinforce the drive for candidates to engage in this sort of international experience. At the European level, the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions (MSCA) are an example of such incentives. At the national level, the Eiffel scholarships programme[13] is a French government financial programme that provides support (doctoral fellowships) to doctoral candidates that apply for co-tutelles between their home institution and a French university.

13 For more information, please visit: https://www.campusfrance.org/en/eiffel-scholarship-program-of-excellence.

Organisation of co-tutelles

The previous chapters presented some benefits of co-tutelles. However, in order to get benefits from co-tutelles several potentially problematic organisational elements need to be carefully addressed in advance. To avoid difficulties for the doctoral candidate and the institution, it is important to be aware of these problems from the outset and to find ways to prevent or overcome them. The following sections look at the different stages of co-tutelles and the challenges involved. It provides practices that lead to the successful implementation of co-tutelles. The aim is neither to be exhaustive nor to show these practices as the only correct ones, but simply to provide insights on how these processes usually work.

ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

As it is required in the case of a regular doctorate, before applying for a co-tutelle, doctoral candidates must fulfil the admission requirements set out in the doctoral regulations of each university offering the doctoral programmes that will be involved in the collaboration process.

Once admitted, the co-tutelle doctoral candidate is simultaneously enrolled at both the home and the host institution for the duration of the co-tutelle. Usually, the home institution is the one where the candidate enrolled first or the one that the candidate has contacted first. The host institution is the other partner institution.

At most universities involved in this working group, formal admission to the doctoral programme at both institutions is necessary before the co-tutelle agreement is completed. However, some universities require the signing of the co-tutelle agreement by all the actors involved before the doctoral candidate enrols in a doctoral programme. In some countries (e.g. France and Portugal), the decision to enter into a co-tutelle may be made soon after enrolment at the home university and the agreement should be signed soon after that.

CO-TUTELLE AGREEMENT

As mentioned above, the process leading to a co-tutelle agreement starts when an actor (e.g. supervisor, doctoral candidate or an academic leader) takes the initiative to suggest the establishment of a co-tutelle.

Whether the initiative begins before or after enrolment, the *first step* towards a co-tutelle agreement is submitting a research proposal prepared by supervisors and doctoral candidates. As an annex, the co-tutelle agreement often includes a schedule listing the work to be done at each partner university. In some institutions, it is common for supervisors and doctoral candidates who want to start a co-tutelle to finalise this proposal before the end of the first year of the doctorate. This is because time is needed to negotiate and agree with the partner university on the elements that should be included in the co-tutelle agreement. At some universities, the research proposal can be submitted later (as an exception), particularly if there is already a solid academic and institutional cooperation with the partner university.

A *second step* is negotiating the co-tutelle agreement. This phase takes a considerable amount of time and usually involves the administrative and legal offices of the home and host universities. Their task is to draw up a first version of the agreement, which will set out the conditions that the doctoral candidate must fulfil in order to be awarded a degree by both institutions. It also addresses issues of institutional interest, including: academic regulations, research conditions, intellectual property and administrative and financial issues.

This document is then reviewed by representatives of the university in a leadership position (e.g. dean, director of the doctoral school, head of international affairs) and by the Office of Legal Affairs to ensure that it meets the legal requirements. In a final step, when all stakeholders involved have completed their work, the agreement must be formally approved by the university bodies and signed by the legal representatives of both partner institutions.

Usually, the agreement is signed during the first year. However, in some cases, it can take significantly longer. In a few cases, it takes so long that not only are candidates' mobility agreements put into place without a legal framework, but public defence procedures, too, are delayed or impaired. For the sake of candidates' timely graduation, this issue needs to be avoided.

PROGRESS MONITORING WITHIN THE DOCTORATE

The discussions and work of the Thematic Peer Group also focused on the process that follows the signing of the co-tutelle agreement and the progress of a doctoral candidate enrolled in a co-tutelle programme.

Doctoral candidates develop their research projects under the supervision of both universities' supervisors, according to the previously agreed research plans. The plans set out when they should stay in each of the partner universities and what they should do there.

Traditions, procedures and guidelines for feedback and supervision may vary widely between countries. This can lead to differing expectations and a lack of clarity on responsibilities shared between candidates and supervisors, causing misunderstandings and delays. Thus, supervisors and candidates must have a strong commitment to regular communication and joint responsibility to ensure a smooth progress of the co-tutelle project.

Often, feedback includes formal mandatory procedures like progress reports to a supervisory committee whose approval may be necessary to enter the next year of a doctoral course. However, in some cases, there is a mid-term evaluation by the end of the first year or later. This takes place at one of the universities before a follow-up committee composed of supervisors and other members from the partner institutions (or in special cases other stakeholders as well), which may lead to a "go/no-go" decision.

In cases where these formal procedures are different at both institutions, it is advisable to mention this aspect in the co-tutelle agreement to ensure that that the partner university and the doctoral candidate are aware of this condition, acknowledge it and accept the consequences that may arise.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

During the meetings, the group members addressed the issue of required taught courses for a doctoral candidate in a co-tutelle. During the discussions, it became clear that there are significant differences between universities over how this possible component of doctoral education is managed and delivered. In some systems/universities, the co-tutelle doctoral candidate must complete the same courses as other doctoral candidates enrolled at that institution in order to receive the degree. In other universities, there may be no specific taught courses required at all. Besides, the content of the courses and the number of ECTS may differ from one university to the other. These possible differences between partner institutions raise the question of which rules to apply to a co-tutelle candidate.

Usually, discussions about how required courses will be delivered are part of the negotiation process, and the final decisions are recorded in the co-tutelle agreement. In cases where one of the partner universities requires the doctoral candidate to attend required courses, this must be a part of the co-tutelle agreement. Thus, not only the doctoral candidate but also the partner university and supervisor of this requirement are informed, ensuring that the candidate will be able to meet all course requirements.

Some Thematic Peer Group members pointed out that their universities can recognise the courses provided by the partner institutions using the ECTS system, given that the requirements set out in the university regulations on the provision of doctoral training are met. In those cases, they exempt the doctoral candidate from having to complete the same or similar courses twice.

DEFENCE AND PUBLICATION OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

Another important element in co-tutelles is the organisation of the thesis defence and the jury nomination procedure. Most of the universities represented in the EUA-CDE Thematic Peer Group indicated that the structure and location of the defence is usually part of the negotiation process for the co-tutelle agreement and is addressed there. During the examination process, internal defence rules of the university hosting the defence are often applied and accepted by the partner university. However, in some cases, some deviation from those rules may be possible under the umbrella of co-tutelles and this may enable a better fit to the most vital requirements of both parties.

Once the thesis is submitted for defence, the partner university is informed of the beginning of the procedure by the university where the defence takes place. The partner university must also follow and approve all the steps up to awarding of the degree and receive the relevant documentation (such as the thesis, reviewers' reports, and, at the end of the process, a digital copy of the diploma issued). In most cases, the partner university must appoint at least one staff member to be part of the defence committee (or jury). As there are major differences between the countries regarding the composition of the doctoral defence committees (e.g. Finland has no committee but a system of pre-examination and opponents) and the rules for the defence, these should be addressed in the co-tutelle framework agreement and pragmatic solutions found.

Most universities specify in the co-tutelle agreement the language in which the doctoral thesis is to be written and that will be used during the defence. English is usually accepted as well as French, German or Spanish. The doctoral thesis can also be written in one of the languages of the doctoral-granting institutions. In this case, either an abstract covering about 10% of the text (i.e. an extended abstract) or a normal abstract in the language of the other partner university may also be required.

Candidates that successfully defend their doctoral thesis will have the thesis and the defence evaluated and will be granted the doctoral degree. They will be awarded either a single diploma or two diplomas which refer to each other and are only valid in conjunction with each other. The fact that diplomas are legal documents may complicate this aspect of co-tutelles, as the universities' room for manoeuvre with regard to the content and wording of the diploma is limited. This point will be addressed in more detail in the "Challenges" section of this report.

Most universities require that the doctoral thesis is not only to be archived in their institutional repositories but also made accessible worldwide shortly after the defence. However, there may be cases where immediate open access is not appropriate, and there is an embargo on publication for a specific period (e.g. due to intellectual property issues). As both universities have to follow the same rules, the co-tutelle agreement should also address this issue.

Challenges identified

The group identified the following challenges universities face in developing co-tutelle arrangements with other institutions.

LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES

Each European country/university has its own regulations (academic, legal, financial) and procedures regarding doctorates (which sometimes change very frequently). Therefore, when initiating a co-tutelle process, the administrations of both institutions need to familiarise themselves with each other's regulations to make effective arrangements that meet the requirements of both.

As there are some incompatible regulations or guiding principles in different countries, drafting co-tutelle agreements is a rather complex and labour-intensive process.[14] Generally, it is not easy to agree on a general model of agreement suitable for every situation, as relevant regulations, whether at the national or institutional level, are highly variable and often incompatible, evolving over time. Furthermore, clarifying which laws and regulations (both national and institutional) cannot be waived can be a significant difficulty, leading to detailed and lengthy negotiations involving everything from admission to supervision, doctoral thesis to degree conferral.

The discussion on intellectual property rights is also an important part of the negotiations leading to co-tutelle agreements. Provisions and arrangements for dealing with intellectual property rights can either be included as a section in the co-tutelle agreement or be the subject of an annex to that agreement. Therefore, legal advisors should be asked to formulate and review the most appropriate type of intellectual property protection to be mentioned in the agreement, taking into consideration that some candidates may carry out doctoral research on their own or in collaboration with other entities or organisations, including their employers.

Although there are currently many different types of intellectual property rights, there is a common provision on intellectual property ownership. Generally, ownership of intellectual property belongs to the creator of the intellectual property, which means that ownership of intellectual property belongs to the doctoral candidate who has developed research results of commercial value, subject to variation in the case of externally sponsored or collaborative work, namely with the candidate's employer.

A joint examination procedure in itself does not result in any property rights for the universities. But longer research stays with employment at both institutions and intensive cooperation with both supervisors may complicate the situation. Thus, all the parties involved (i.e. universities, supervisors, candidate and other stakeholders, if applicable) are required to address the intellectual property rights they dispose of and come to a mutual understanding.

DEFENCE OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

Another major challenge in reaching agreement on a standard authorisation is the existence of different doctoral assessment traditions in Europe. The following elements usually require lengthy discussions and coordination between the parties involved:

- the thesis assessment and review process;
- the composition of the assessment/examination committee;
- the grading system.

As far as the first point is concerned, at most universities the manuscript of the doctoral thesis is usually subjected to an assessment process prior to the defence. In some countries or universities the reviewers can require changes in the thesis as a condition for their recommendation whereas in others, reviewers' recommendation cannot be conditional. This means that, at some universities, the candidate may just be admitted to defend the doctoral thesis or not whereas at other universities, the reviewers may require the candidate to introduce changes prior to the defence. If these differences exist between the partners, the universities involved in the co-tutelle must agree on the review procedure and its organisation before signing the agreement.

After the defence, some universities/countries ask the candidate to introduce some corrections in the final version of the doctoral thesis, as a condition for awarding the degree. In other countries, this may not be the case. There are also different publication requirements – some institutions require a printed publication before the doctor title can be used. Such differences between the partner institutions should be considered when preparing the co-tutelle agreement in order to avoid false expectations from the candidate. The composition of the assessment committee, too, varies significantly between the European countries and can require lengthy discussions, as the internal regulations of the two institutions must be observed when selecting committee members. A common feature is that in the evaluation committee, members have to be appointed by the two partner institutions. However, some university regulations require a minimum number of external members to be integrated into the committee, and universities may have different understandings on this. To avoid later conflicts, first of all, the partners should agree on who external members are, i.e. whether they are external to the university where the defence takes place or whether they are external to both partner institutions. Afterwards, in cases where the parties' regulations on the composition of the assessment

14 Artigas, D., Miranda, E., Sepulcre., F. (2019), *One thesis, two diplomas: the real challenge presented by cotutelle agreements*, Retrieved 8 December 2021, from: https://eua-cde.org/the-doctoral-debate/101:one-thesis,-two-diplomas-the-real-challenge-presented-by-cotutelle-agreements.html.

committee contradict each other, a compromise can be reached in various ways:

- If one university requires the presence of the supervisor in the assessment committee (e.g. in Germany) and the other university prohibits this (e.g. in Spain), a compromise can be found by appointing the supervisor to this committee, but not including the evaluation of the supervisor into the overall assessment of the doctoral thesis. Another way to deal with this issue is to allow a certain degree of flexibility and provide that each university can appoint half of the committee members according to its rules; in some cases, universities require the presence of a scientist working at their site who can become part of the assessment committee instead of the supervisor. When legally applicable, another way out may be to consider the presence of voting/non-voting members in the committee.
- If one of the partner universities requires a higher number of external members in this committee than the other university, an agreement can be reached by selecting committee members who can meet the requirements of both universities, so that they can be considered committee members by both partners.

As negotiations related to the organisation of the doctoral thesis defence are in most cases very time-consuming, the members of the Thematic Peer Group pointed out that issues such as the composition of the defence committee, the location of the doctoral thesis defence and the language in which the doctoral thesis is written and defended must be discussed and agreed upon before the co-tutelle begins. Failure to agree on these aspects may result in the doctoral thesis defence not being possible.

As far as the grading system is concerned, there are meaningful differences between countries and institutions. Even when similar grading systems are used, differences may exist with regard to the award of f.i,, *cum laude, magna cum laude or summa cum laude*. Correspondence between grading systems and criteria for awarding *cum laude* are sensitive issues that should be discussed, agreed upon, and included in the co-tutelle agreement.

DIPLOMAS

The awarding of diplomas involves legal issues and must follow rules set in the country or in the higher education institution awarding the diploma. In some countries it is possible to have a double-signed diploma, including the logos and signature of a national and a foreign party, but in others this may not possible; also, in some countries it is possible to add a reference to co-tutelle in the text of the diploma but others may not be allowed to change the approved text of the diploma. The Thematic Peer Group discussed this issue and showed some concern about cases when a single diploma is not possible, as this can lead to multiplication of degrees obtained under co-tutelle agreements. This means that partners should discuss this aspect in advance, be as flexible as their internal rules allow, and establish whether a unique diploma will be signed by the two partners or whether two separate diplomas will be issued. In the latter case, they need to avoid a situation where a doctoral degree obtained under co-tutelle is perceived as two separate doctoral degrees. This means that the diplomas must in some way mention that the degree was obtained under a co-tutelle with a given party. The way this can be done depends on the countries involved.

ECONOMIC BARRIERS

One aspect that the group members agreed on is that engaging in a co-tutelle usually requires additional funding as the candidate has to move and spend part of the time in another country. Thus, candidates may need to apply for funding and succeed in the application before being able to go for a co-tutelle. The Thematic Peer Group members identified different approaches and funding sources in the countries involved in this working group.

The most common funding modalities mentioned in the meetings were university scholarships, ministry and other grants, mobility grants or national funding programmes such as the programme of the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) in Switzerland[15] (which covers cooperation between a Swiss university and a partner institution abroad) and the French Eiffel scholarships programme (that funds candidates that apply for co-tutelle between their home institution and a French university). At the European level, the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions (MSCA) were also mentioned.

Some group members pointed out that doctoral candidates are entitled to a salary in the countries where they have junior researcher status and have the necessary means to apply for a co-tutelle even if they do not get additional funding.

Some universities and national agencies have funding initiatives that can promote co-tutelles. For example, every academic year, the Polytechnic University of Valencia[16] publishes a call for applications for doctoral candidates who complete a mobility period abroad of at least six months.

In Italy, the national law DM 45/2013 provides that doctoral candidates who receive a scholarship from the Ministry of Education, University and Research or are enrolled in an industrial doctoral programme can receive an increase of up to 50% in the scholarship for mobility periods abroad of up to 18 months. In the case of an industrial doctorate, the company where the doctoral candidate works during the doctoral programme must pay for this additional entitlement.

In Portugal, the Foundation for Science and Technology[17] offers mixed scholarships for selected doctoral candidates who plan to spend some time abroad to develop a part of their research

15 For more information, please visit: https://www.sbfi.admin.ch/sbfi/en/home.html.

16 For more information, please visit: https://www.upv.es/entidades/EDOCTORADO/info/970397normali.html.

17 For more information, please visit: https://www.fct.pt/apoios/bolsas/concursos/individuais2022.phtml.en.

project. This means that the doctoral candidates receive a higher stipend during their stay abroad than if they were at home, which may not only facilitate but also drive engagement in a co-tutelle.

However, it should be highlighted that some funding bodies provide funds for a period of time shorter than the duration of the co-tutelle, in which case the doctoral candidate must find another source of funding for the remaining time with the support of one of the participating universities.

Other economic challenges, related to the tuition fees and the differences that exist among European countries, are the following:

- In countries where doctoral candidates have the status of candidates without a salary and scholarships are very limited in number and amount of money, co-tutelles are reserved for a small proportion of doctoral candidates who have a scholarship and other source of funding that allows them to go abroad;
- Enrolment (i.e. tuition) fees vary greatly from country to country. It should be decided early on where and when the doctoral candidate will have to pay the enrolment fees to make things clear for all parties (particularly, for the candidate), to not cause delays in administrative processes and to release the candidate from the risk of paying fees twice.

LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL ANCHORING

Many universities find it very difficult to implement an institutional strategy for the whole university as most co-tutelles are the result of individual initiatives by supervisors or doctoral candidates. This not only increases the legal and administrative burden, but also reduces support for this type of collaboration. During the Thematic Peer Group meetings, the members suggested that universities should address the issue of co-tutelles and decide on how important this collaboration tool is for the sake of institutional development and internationalisation. They expect that this could lead universities to look at co-tutelles less as sporadic events of individual interest but rather as part of the strategic institutional plan with appropriate allocation of resources and explicit guidelines that may reduce the administrative burden that frightens people and causes delays.

RESEARCH ETHICS AND INTEGRITY

Ethics is a very important issue in research, especially when people, animals and the environment are at stake. Co-tutelle doctoral research projects may need to be approved by partner university bodies in charge of ethics in research or even by other stakeholders such as hospitals. To avoid duplication or triplication of work and undesirable delays, the conditions for ethical approval of the doctoral research project should be discussed in a timely manner. Universities can thus find an expedited way to both solve the problem and include this solution in the agreement.

Co-tutelles are particularly tested when unforeseen problems arise. These include, for example, conflicts with one of the supervisors or academic misconduct by one of the participants. Institutions handle these problems differently and abide by different regulations. This may mean that, for example, in non-straightforward cases of plagiarism, both institutions could come to different conclusions or impose consequences with varying intensities, which are not good for the partnership. Thus, to avoid inter-institutional problems, this issue should be discussed early on, and ways of dealing with it should be agreed in advance and included in the agreement.

ADAPTATION TO THE COVID-19 PERIOD

The Thematic Peer Group began its work amid the Covid-19 pandemic, and when its work ended in 2021, the pandemic was not yet over. This forced the group to work online, with all the challenges that entailed, and led to important discussions about how fellow participants were affected by this unexpected situation. Since March 2020, almost everyone has been affected by this crisis and had to adapt to a new way of working, studying or interacting with their peers. In this difficult context, the doctoral schools also had to adapt their way of working in many areas. This included rethinking and reorganising some of the key steps and requirements related to co-tutelles. For example, before the pandemic it was common that at least 25% to 50% of the doctoral candidate's time (usually one to two years) was to be spent at the partner institution.

There was more flexibility on important aspects such as the face-to-face final examination (that in some cases were conducted online), the required mobility period at the host institution (which was rescheduled or reduced), etc. Doctoral candidates also had to find new ways of interacting with their supervisors via digital tools and adapt to the new normal of online doctoral thesis defence.

Although technology has certainly helped universities to continue working with co-tutelle and has solved many problems caused by the pandemic (for example, it has ensured the delivery of formal teaching, such as the exchange of study materials and the delivery of courses, and the development of co-tutelle agreements, etc.), there are still aspects that cannot be solved with digital tools. A common concern is how to reassure doctoral candidates who are willing to start a co-tutelle, as well as all other stakeholders involved, that the current situation will not contribute to a delay in their doctoral project. And if it does, the concern is how to minimise the damage caused, as postponing the submission deadline (a measure taken by some universities) may not be enough.

This situation also led to a more fundamental discussion on whether there could be a 'virtual co-tutelle', where the doctoral candidate is never physically present in the host institution, but only interacts virtually with supervisors and colleagues in the

'host institution', and whether the answer is the same regardless of the academic field. The role and impact of virtual mobility and exchange in doctoral education is not yet 100% clear and will undoubtedly lead to further discussions in the near future.

Ways forward

The group suggests the following ideas to address some of the challenges described above:

- Develop an institutional policy for co-tutelles that goes beyond the individual interest of the doctoral candidate and/or the supervisor and is based on a thorough reflection on the benefits the university expects from co-tutelles. This approach would lead to institutional strategic co-tutelles that can be more effective in enhancing the quality of candidates' education and strengthening the university's internationalisation. This starts with sharing knowledge, streamlining processes and setting standards for co-tutelles within the institution. If a competent office for co-tutelle, guidelines and a model co-tutelle contract exist, much time is saved in each individual co-tutelle.

- Start with small steps before proposing a broader strategy within the university, for example, by promoting less formal international collaborations or offering structured co-tutelles in specific programmes. In the medium term, this approach will make it possible to avoid unsystematic co-tutelles aimed only at individual doctoral candidates and to establish co-tutelles as a permanent and sustainable instrument of cooperation.

- Draft an institutional template co-tutelle agreement that can be used as a reference when negotiating individual candidates' co-tutelle agreements. This can lead to a reduction in administrative burden, since it provides clarity to all stakeholders on the general conditions that apply to all co-tutelles, releasing them from having to discuss those aspects every time they negotiate an individual co-tutelle agreement with a specific institution. This way, only the specificities that apply to each candidate would need to be discussed for each new co-tutelle.

- Find innovative ways to reduce the administrative burden related to co-tutelles, such as the following suggestions:

  - Publish clear guidelines and minimum standards for the negotiation phase and communicate them clearly and regularly to the partner university, and within your own university, as most inter-institutional problems arise when the partner university overlooks one of the aspects defined in the agreement and required by the other university. This is also important because many supervisors and all candidates are doing a co-tutelle for the first time;
  - Have a single framework agreement with a partner university (sometimes has to be signed by different deans of the respective faculties) setting the general conditions and rules that apply to a co-tutelles programme, and build on that to prepare and sign an addendum for personal details of each individual joining the programme;
  - Draft a simple and friendly form to be completed by any applicant wishing to engage in co-tutelle with details of their work plan only to be included in the co-tutelle agreement or addendum.
  - Learn from previous experiences, because once an agreement has been negotiated with a university, many sections can be repeated and used as a template for negotiating future co-tutelle agreements with the same university or faculty (and often with other universities, too).
  - Provide examples of co-tutelle agreements between two similar doctoral programmes that offer the legal, academic, pedagogical, administrative, regulatory and economic framework for the co-tutelle of doctoral candidates participating in this pair of doctoral programmes at both universities.

- Trust in the partner university and use a certain degree of flexibility in negotiations, as this may be the only way to reach an agreement.

- Ask the legal departments of the universities to discuss the specific rules for the management of common property rights and commercial exploitation. Problems associated with intellectual property rights are particularly difficult to deal with and should therefore be addressed at the earliest stage of negotiation so as to not impede the co-tutelle agreement. If the intellectual property regulations of the universities involved are very different or even contradictory, avoid delays in the signing of the co-tutelle agreement by opting to append decisions on this issue to the agreement.

- Compare the partners' policies to deal with open access and institutional repositories, and if there are meaningful differences, discuss approaches to deal with the difference when preparing the agreement.

- Discuss and agree on the main rules for publication of research results, as partner institutions and supervisors may have different policies on authorship and publication time, which may lead to undesirable, unclear and unpleasant situations for the candidate.

- Integrate joint research development expectations into the agreement for the sustainability of the partnership beyond the awarding of the doctoral degree.

- Assist doctoral candidates in understanding the sources of funding available and the conditions that must be met if they wish to apply for a scholarship that will allow them to engage in a co-tutelle. (Sometimes the scholarships are not explicitly for co-tutelles but can easily be directed towards them; in other cases, scholarship applications should meet certain conditions to be used for co-tutelle purposes).

- Consider having a contact person for the management of co-tutelles at your own university who could also act as a co-tutelle correspondent and network with colleagues in similar positions at other European universities.

Conclusions

When collaboration and internationalisation are important elements of universities in general and doctoral education in particular, co-tutelles are not the only, but a relevant element to provide doctoral candidates with international experiences and bring institutions together. On the one hand, they support the doctoral candidates both in their current research and in their future career. On the other hand, co-tutelle related partnerships can strengthen the research capacity of the partner institutions. This explains the increasing demand for this instrument of internationalisation in doctoral education. However, the organisation of co-tutelles is associated with an effort that should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, as the work of the Thematic Peer Group and this resulting report have suggested, this effort can be reduced in many ways. These include good and timely planning, and good and thorough communication between the involved institutions, addressing all important questions as early as possible.

It has also been emphasised that strategic partnerships between institutions beyond the individual co-tutelles, settled through framework agreements, can provide a good basis for future cooperation and increase the impact of co-tutelles on a broader level. However, such partnerships must channel the bottom-up approach of many co-tutelles, which are mostly led by the doctoral candidates and supervisors. Framework agreements, between two universities or two of their doctoral programmes, with addendum for individual candidates, can create new connections that benefit all parties (doctoral candidate, supervisor, and institution) in the long run.

The way forward may be in developing university-promoted framework agreements (with individual addenda for each candidate) in line with the higher education institution's internationalisation policy, while continuing to work with bottom-up initiatives (initiated by the candidate or the supervisor), to enable promising individual-driven collaboration.

A relevant part of the text has dealt with the challenges and problems that arise in the development of co-tutelles. This is not to imply that institutions should be prevented from introducing this instrument. On the contrary. A proper planning and foresight can help avoid potential pitfalls and make the instrument of co-tutelles a successful aspect of the universities' portfolio.

During the Thematic Peer Group meetings, it became evident that exchange of experiences between institutions is also beneficial independently of the individual co-tutelles. In this sense, the EUA Council for Doctoral Education will continue to address the issue, promoting collaboration and good practices exchange between universities in Europe, but also beyond that, on a global scale.

Annex

EUA-CDE THEMATIC PEER GROUP "CO-TUTELLES AND JOINT DOCTORATES"

The EUA Council for Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE) established the Thematic Peer Group (TPG) on "Co-tutelles and Joint Doctorates" in 2020 with the aim to provide participating members an opportunity for mutual learning on the selected topic and to invite them to share their experience and good practices. This is one of several Thematic Peer Groups at EUA that meet a couple of times and consist of representatives of member universities, which bring expertise in a certain thematic area.

The main objectives of EUA-CDE Thematic Peer Groups are:

- exploration of the success of and room for improvement in doctoral education structures, policies and practices in Europe;
- contribution to a common knowledge base on doctoral education in Europe by identifying key lessons learnt on the selected topic.

EUA-CDE launched a call for participation in December 2019 to select this working group.

The second EUA-CDE Thematic Peer Group consisted of 23 representatives from 15 countries. To collect input on key issues related to the topic of *co-tutelles de thèse*, the TPG members were asked to participate in a short survey, which served as preparation for following activities. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the group also met in two online meetings organised throughout 2020 and 2021 to discuss the topic of *co-tutelles de thèse* and focus on the collection of innovative practices and alternative forms of collaboration.

During their online meetings, the group members addressed the relevance of co-tutelles, shared the various steps necessary to develop a co-tutelle, identified the key challenges associated with these agreements and provided suggestions for mitigating these challenges that could serve as inspiration for their peers.

This group was chaired by one participating member and was coordinated by the EUA-CDE Secretariat.

Composition of the Thematic Peer Group "Co-tutelles and Joint Doctorates"[18]:

- Laurinda Leite, Vice-Rector for Education, University of Minho, Portugal (Chair)
- Eugenio Brusa, Director of the Doctoral School, Polytechnic University of Turin, Italy
- Emer Cunningham, Graduate Education Development Manager, University College Dublin, Ireland
- Francisco Guillermo Diaz Baños, Director of the International Doctoral School, University of Murcia, Spain
- Anouk Distelmans, Secretary of the Research Council, Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium
- José Miguel Doña Rodríguez, Vice-Rector for Institutional Planning and Coordination, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain
- Izabela Grabowska, Director of the Interdisciplinary Doctoral School, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Poland
- Jari Hämäläinen, Vice-President for Research and Innovation, Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology, Finland
- Matthias Köhler, Assistant Managing Director at Goethe Graduate Academy for Early Career Researchers, Goethe University Frankfurt am Main, Germany
- Luisa Lorenzi, Administrative Head of the Doctoral School, University of Milan Bicocca, Italy
- Javier Martínez Sánchez, Secretary of the Doctoral School, Polytechnical University of Valencia, Spain
- Benjamí Martorell Masip, Manager of the Doctoral School, Rovira i Virgili University, Spain
- Frank Neubert Zurlinden, Scientific Advisor at Graduate Center, University of Basel, Switzerland
- Janne Østvang, Senior Adviser, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway
- Adela Pintea, Director of the Council for Doctoral Studies, University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Cluj-Napoca, Romania
- Igor Prpić, Head of Doctoral School, University of Rijeka, Croatia
- Alexander Schwarzkopf, Program Manager for International Mobility of Early-Stage Researchers, Friedrich Schiller University of Jena, Germany
- Mossadek Talby, Director of the Doctoral College, Aix-Marseille University, France; EUA-CDE Steering Committee member
- Mounir Tarek, Coordinator of the Doctoral College, University of Lorraine, France
- Paul van Dijk, Director at Twente Graduate School, University of Twente, Netherlands
- Florian Wegelein, Legal Affairs Advisor, Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany
- Carolyn Wynne, Director of the Doctoral College & Centre for Researcher Capability and Development, Coventry University, UK
- Zizheng Zhang, Deputy Managing Director for International Engagement & Diversity at Graduate School, Technical University of Munich, Germany

Group coordinators:

- Alexander Hasgall, Head of EUA-CDE
- Ana-Maria Peneoasu, Policy & Project Officer, EUA-CDE

18 Job positions as of 6 November 2020.

euacde COUNCIL FOR DOCTORAL EDUCATION

The EUA Council for Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE) was launched in 2008 at the initiative of the European University Association, responding to a growing interest in doctoral education and research training in Europe. An integral part of the European University Association, it is now the largest European network in this field, covering more than 260 universities and institutions working on issues related to doctoral education and research training in 37 countries.

Since its creation, EUA-CDE has been leading the transformation and strengthening of doctoral education in Europe. Building on the outcomes of EUA's work on doctoral programmes and research careers, EUA-CDE has been the driving force behind the implementation of the Salzburg Principles and Recommendations and the promotion of doctoral education as the main intersection between the European higher education and research.

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