

Joint supervision – blessing and cursed path of doing a PhD at two universities

Jewish identity and cultural heritage observed from two different academic perspectives

As if doing a PhD at one university is not “difficult” enough, I opted for a cotutelle agreement between the [University of Luxembourg](#) and [Charles University](#) for my PhD project on Cultural and Educational activities of the Jewish minority in Czechoslovakia and Luxembourg (1945 -1989). Since my roots are in the Czech Republic and Jewish history is very close to me, a jointly supervised thesis seemed like a clear choice. In fact, this was the first step on a tortuous road to a contract that was supposed to make my studies much easier and less stressful. The whole process took almost a year until all signatures were on the right place. Both university legal departments were constantly working on the contract to implement various remarks and additions. To avoid any unforeseen issues in the future, I also asked our family lawyer to check out the entire document. I have to admit that the draft of the *cotutelle* agreement is rather complicated in some places.

Before I embark on joint supervision from an administrative perspective, I would like to point out some scientific aspects that largely influence my academic work. First, it is important to take into account the research environment in two different countries. The Czech Republic has a long and rich Jewish historiography enhanced by many reputable scholars. A large number of Jewish academic institutions and associations located in this country strive for raising public awareness of Jewish history. Such an environment offers a great reference to all who begin studying Jewish modern history. Second, it is priceless for my work to meet people dealing with methodologies and methods applicable to oral history.

Despite the ubiquity of global oral history databases, I must admit that this discipline is still in its infancy in Luxembourg. Well-maintained and classified testimonies are essential for all oral historians and the unlimited access to the biggest global databases is still hiding in the remote future. This was my main drive to pursue a joint supervision as an experimental model of studying. Third, my previous work as a teacher also meant I wanted to focus on educational aspects of my research the Faculty of Education at Charles University ranks among the most respected educational institutions in my country and its computational department is very helpful in developing hands-on e-learning platforms for young students and schoolchildren. In terms of data collections for my research, I have initiated a collaboration with the [Malach Centre for Visual history](#) in Prague, which provides access to four digital video testimony archives. To foster this collaboration, I arranged for researchers from the Malach to give guest lectures and workshops at the [C2DH in Luxembourg](#). We got an opportunity to exchange our experiences with my Luxembourg colleagues and training them by hands-on demonstrations. Honestly, I feel that these meetings push my work forward. My unusual project also took me to Budapest (Hungary) where I met extraordinary people enthusiastically working on the Jewish national heritage at the [Zachor Institute](#) under the patronage of the [USC Shoah Foundation](#). They helped me to understand the real significance of my project in the context of international Jewish legacy. Their

passion encouraged me to prepare my own course about the video history analysis based on the specific e-learning tools ([IWalk](#) and [IWitness](#)), which is going to take place the next winter semester 2019/2020. I hope that some of them will come to visit my lessons in October or November to impart their knowledge to my students.

Thanks to the joint supervision, I can always rely on a wide range of critical views. Everything works according to the four eyes principle. This means that my supervisors closely supervise and guide my work and they supply me with a load of new publications. On the other hand, I am still independent by combining their opinions and advice. Sometimes it is rather difficult to comply with all demands, but in fact, I am happy to undertake such a genuine project.

A brief word about joint supervision (*cotutelle*)

Joint supervision is a system governed by an individual contract regulating the terms of a PhD thesis supervised by two tutors (known by the French term *cotutelle*). The original idea was to encourage cooperation between two foreign educational institutions. A PhD student is co-tutored by supervisors from two partner institutions and spends part of his or her studies at the foreign university. The length of time spent abroad is always a matter of negotiation, but these periods are set before signing the contract and should not be changed afterwards. The aim of joint supervision is to contribute to the internationalisation of doctoral studies and, in the long term, to promote the integration of the university's research activities within the European research area.

For each PhD student, the partner institutions sign a specific agreement on the joint supervision of the PhD thesis. This agreement sets out the terms, timetable and other aspects of the jointly supervised studies and the defence of the candidate's thesis. It is signed by the student, the supervisors, the head of the student's faculty or department and the University rector, and their counterparts from the partner institution. Once you decide to apply for joint supervision, you will need to collect six signatures, and this may take a long time. Some University rectors set aside just a few hours each month to deal with such matters, and your application can lie on their desk for months!

Once all the signatures are collected, the PhD student is enrolled at both participating universities in accordance with the national legislation of the two countries and enjoys all related academic rights and responsibilities. There may be some problems with paying semester admissions because being enrolled at two institutions means that you may pay twice, except for Charles University in Prague whose PhD programme is free without any additional charges.

The provisions of the *cotutelle* agreement are designed to prevent administrative complications and problems that may arise in the course of the jointly supervised studies. These provisions must not contradict regulations governing PhD studies in either of the participating countries and must comply with the regulations issued by the universities and faculties involved. Universities differ in their approach to joint supervision: minor modifications are therefore a matter of course.

Be careful...

The previous paragraph may seem overly dramatic, suggesting that PhD students need to be very wary about administrative complications and legal issues. And there is certainly a need for extra vigilance.

My main advice to other PhD students who are considering signing a joint supervision agreement is to be careful about the periods set aside for studying abroad. It may be that your supervisors or the HR departments do not take your schedule and study plans seriously, and you get stuck negotiating between two institutions. This can be particularly inconvenient if you have to conduct regular and continuous empirical research at one of your institutions.

It is also important to mention that joint supervision creates greater logistical challenges because you move back and forth quite a bit and you have to fulfil assessment requirements at two institutions, e.g. an annual review, coursework, progress seminars, formal progress documentation, proposals, etc. If both universities work well together, everything is fine. However, in my case, I also face several issues in synchronising teaching requirements and the format of annual thesis supervision committee (*comité d'encadrement de thèse*, or CET) meetings. At the Faculty of Education in Prague, an annual conference is usually organised for PhD students where they present their progress to other PhD students and to their supervisors. In addition, I have to hand in an annual report by the end of September every year to get permission to continue my work at Charles University in Prague. In total I need to prepare three different reports about my ongoing work each year. In Luxembourg, the CET meeting is held before March every year and the report is sent to all participants to be signed. It always takes a while to obtain all the signatures, especially from overseas supervisors.

Who pays for what?

You need to be particularly careful when it comes to specifying who pays for what! It is essential to clarify which institution will pay for your final PhD defence and any catering for the occasion, travel allowances of professors, etc. This significant point is not clearly specified in the draft version of the contract and it is up to you how you figure out this matter. I am sure that everyone wants to avoid paying the business expenses of committee members who come to a final defence from all over the world!

The tricky thing is that one of the partner institutions can seem put out by your absence and it may decline to pay anything to reimburse your travel allowances, teaching, conferences, etc. – but you still need to meet the same study conditions there as at your main university that is fully funding your studies. Jointly supervised projects regulates the number of months (not semesters) you spend at particular institutions in different countries. However, in most cases, you are not allowed to divide your study into two same periods (e.g. half year in Prague and half year in Luxembourg). It means that you are pressed to neglect a part of project. To avoid doing so, you must very carefully schedule your time reserved for research. Archives and libraries have very various opening hours and you must plan everything ahead.

Study requirements and travel arrangements

I also highly recommend checking out all the terms and objectives related to a mandatory number of ECTS and teaching requirements. And finally yet importantly, it is good to know the minimum required number of articles and papers that you will have to publish in peer-reviewed journals. Charles University requests publication of three papers in no-impact journals or one in a high-impact journal. PhD students also have to regularly contribute to the peer-reviewed journal released by the History Didactics Department. This is just an example to show that conditions can vary considerably and it is useful to consider all aspects of your potential studies in advance.

In terms of time, I spend around three months each year at my partner university in Prague. During this time, I need to teach a course, supervise academic papers, help students revise for entrance exams and visit several archives relevant to my research. I was free to choose when I spent my time there, but it obviously mainly depends on the stage of my research. In my first more theoretical year, I spent a longer stretch in one go in Prague, but now in my third year my stays are limited to shorter, more sporadic visits.

If I were still at the beginning of my research, I would also consider the availability of public transport to Prague from Luxembourg. In pursuit of the cheapest transport solution with the lowest environmental footprint, I use widely popular car sharing. This method is relatively cheap and fast, but often unpredictable. I am inevitably disappointed when I find out my trip has been cancelled just a few hours before I am due to leave. Doing a jointly supervised PhD means higher travel expenses, but there are many one-off scholarships available to cover your travel costs.

Despite all the potential complications mentioned above, I do appreciate being exposed to different academic environments and exchanging ideas with people from different backgrounds. Within the friendly atmosphere of the C²DH, I can benefit from various viewpoints and different academic perspectives largely challenged in a *cotutelle*. In addition, I can also take advantage of a great variety of inputs and feedback, which have made a valuable contribution to my research. Nevertheless, the significance of the joint supervision process should not be overestimated. Although it gives you the opportunity to benefit from international networking, it does require a great deal of extra work and a goal-oriented type of character.