

DEVELOPING COMPETENCES FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION: ITALIAN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Abstract

The paper offers some considerations on the relationship between university internationalisation and development cooperation on the basis of the preliminary findings of a research on students' mobility in the Global South implemented by the University of Turin in partnership with Italian NGOs. During these experiences students use technical knowledge acquired through higher education and develop competences to work in multicultural and complex environments. This complementarity points at the need for universities to internationalise in partnership with other actors.

Keywords

Higher education, academic mobility, intercultural competence, development cooperation, university internationalisation.

Development cooperation offers several opportunities for the academy to endorse the nowadays unavoidable mantra of university internationalisation. Universities get involved in development cooperation through different channels: education and training, research, and their so called “third mission”, namely knowledge transfer and/or co-production and research dissemination. Academic involvement in development cooperation might be also inspired by the will to promote academic mobility, to reinforce students' intercultural competences and to promote civic commitment and cooperative spirit on global issues, or, in other words, to operate for global citizenship education (Khoo, 2011).

While university internationalisation and academic mobility are growing field of research, very few studies have addressed their link with development cooperation, in spite of a long tradition of development studies and of academic involvement in international development cooperation. When it comes to university internationalisation and academic mobility, the North-South relationship is traditionally addressed in terms of brain drain. Very few are the studies on academic mobility from the Global North to the Global South, whose impact and consequences on individuals remain practically unknown.

Our explorative study aims at contributing to fill this gap by looking at the relationship between university internationalisation and development cooperation through the lens of the knowledge and competences approach. We address the following question: which knowledge and competences are built through the interaction between academic training and students experiences of international mobility in development cooperation projects?

We take as case study the University of Turin's project Uni.Coo (University for International Cooperation), a partnership between the University, NGOs and local authorities aimed at sponsoring mobility grants to undertake applied field research in development cooperation projects. The project is co-funded by the University of Turin and a bank foundation, Fondazione Cassa Risparmio di Torino.

This paper is based on the preliminary findings of 43 questionnaires administered to the students who participated to Uni.Coo in 2012 and 2013. These findings are a part of a broader action research project designed to monitor and evaluate Uni.Coo. Here we focus on two issues: *i*) the knowledge and the competences acquired through higher education that students perceive to be more relevant and useful once they get involved in applied field research in development cooperation projects; *ii*) the knowledge and competences that students perceive as the most relevant outcomes of this experience.

The preliminary findings here presented suggest that international mobility in the context of development cooperation projects represents a fruitful experience to apply the theoretical and methodological knowledge acquired in higher education and to develop relational, intercultural and organizational competences for working in multicultural and complex environments. These knowledge and competences are crucial elements to increase students' employability, and broadly contribute to the success or failure of development cooperation initiatives. The study points at the need for academic institutions to further reflect on how to strengthen the promotion of these knowledge and competences within their strategy of internationalisation, also through a renovated

collaboration with other development cooperation actors, such as NGOs, in the broader framework of global citizenship education.

Academic mobility and intercultural competence

In the last ten years undergraduate and master level courses on international cooperation and development studies proliferated in Italian universities, following an earlier trend in other OECD countries. However the role of the academy in development cooperation remains mainly analysed in terms of research and knowledge transfer or (co)production. There has been little debate - particularly in Italy - on the contribution of higher education to train human resources for development cooperation and its pedagogical implications in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. Equally the impact of international academic mobility in consolidating these competences has not been analysed yet, since academic mobility from OECD countries to the Global South remains an uncharted field of research.

Studies on the impact of international mobility in terms of knowledge and competences mainly refer either to academic (Coleman and Chafer, 2011) or working experiences (Leyba-O'Sullivan, 1999) in Europe or North America. Researches have shown how the learning outcomes of academic mobility might be ascribed to the following areas: academic, cultural, linguistic, personal and professional (Coleman e Parker, 2001; Coleman, 2007). In addition, the experience abroad is also considered as a hub of personal change, by virtue of the contact with other cultures that can produce long-term changes with significant influences on career choices and life (Dwyer, 2004; Parey and Waldinger, 2007).

The theme of the knowledge and skills related to the experience of mobility abroad has been also the subject of many attempts to systematization and modelling. The models for the development of intercultural competence as a result of internationalization occupy a central place in this field of study (Deardoff, 2006). Intercultural competence can be defined as a complex set of skills that are required to interact effectively and appropriately with people of different language and culture (Fantini, 2009). This is a dynamic construct in a continuous interaction with the environment. The different dimensions of the intercultural competence include attitudes (respect and openness, first), knowledge to understand the other (cultural and socio-linguistic self-awareness), skills (listening, observing, interpreting) and some cross cutting elements such as adaptability, flexibility and autonomy (Kelley and Meyers, 1987), action orientation and curiosity (van der Zee & van

Oudenhoven, 2000), tolerance for ambiguity and critical thinking (Matsumoto et al., 2001), ethno relative mindset and empathy (Deardoff, 2006; 2009).

The experience of mobility itself helps to develop these skills, through processes of adaptation – changing your own behaviour to respond to the environment - and adjustment - becoming aware of the change which is taking place (Matsumoto and Hwang, 2013). Although linguistic fluency is considered central in the studies on international mobility, the complexity of the multicultural competence includes others communication aspects such as interactive behaviours (Fantini, 2009), the awareness of the affective component of intercultural communication (G.M. Chen and Starosta, 2000) or the intercultural sensitivity (Fritz, Mollenberg and Chen, 2002).

Knowledge and competences in Uni.Coo

The Uni.Coo project offers an interesting case study to explore the impact of international mobility in terms of knowledge and competences for development cooperation, and to broadly reflect on the link between university internationalisation and development cooperation.

Uni.Coo has three main features. First, it is inspired by an idealist understanding of university internationalisation, emphasising the responsibility of educating good and morally conscious citizens (Stier, 2010). Uni.Coo overall objective is to contribute to development and poverty reduction by empowering students to actively take part in international cooperation projects.

Second, Uni.Coo adopts a territorial and community engaged approach (Bourke 2,013) to development cooperation: students' mobility take place within development projects implemented by the University of Turin in partnership with regional NGOs and local authorities and with their peers in the countries of intervention.

Third, Uni.Coo promotes students civic engagement by offering them an opportunity of international service learning, namely an experience that combines services objectives with learning objectives in the context of study abroad experiences and academic international partnerships (Bringle, Hatcher and Jones, 2012). Students' mobility aims at contributing to offer solutions to human and communities needs, and at the same time represent an essential element of the education curricula (Baraunsberger and Flamm, 2013).

The project begun in 2012 and up to December 2014 has granted 148 mobility scholarships to 39 countries (23 in Africa, 12 in Latin America and 4 in Asia). Two additional rounds of 40 scholarships each are scheduled for 2015 and 2016. Uni.Coo is open to master level, post-graduate, PhD students, residents and post-doctoral fellows from all University's Departments. Mobility

projects and students are selected through different rounds of open calls. After an induction course in Turin, the students spend up to six months doing field research in the project for which they have been selected. In most of the cases this happens in complex environments, involving a plurality of stakeholders: the student, the University both as sponsor and as academic supervisor of the research, the hosting institution offering tutorship and logistic support on the field, and eventually other local or international organisations. For many students this represents the first working experience in complex, multicultural and often uncomfortable environments.

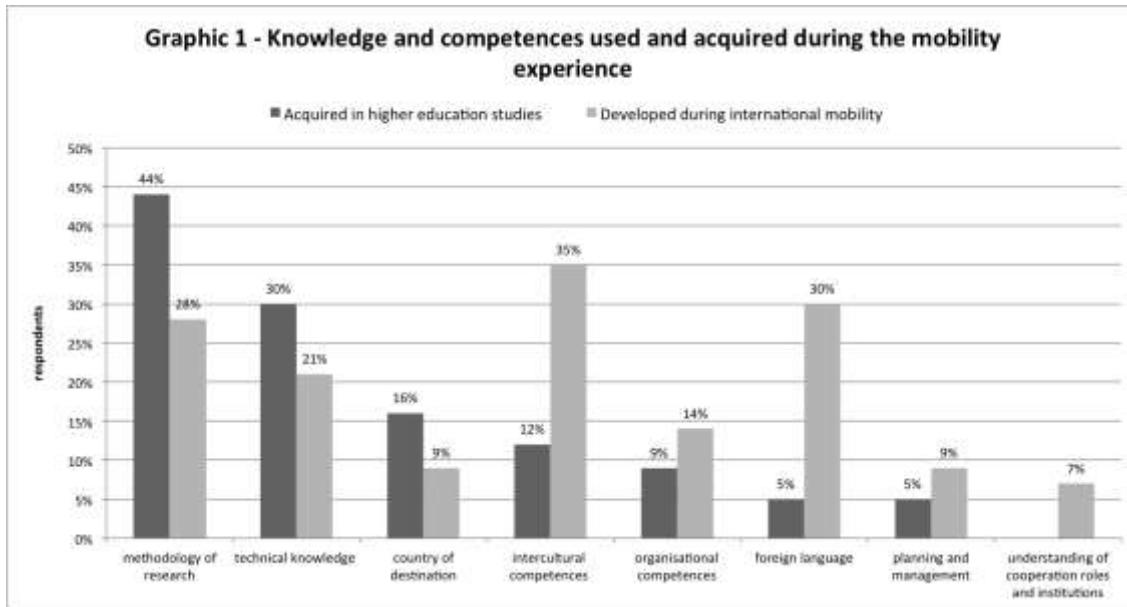
These features of Uni.Coo demand to develop – or to strengthen – a plurality of competences, beside intercultural ones: knowledge and competences on research methodology, relational and organisational competences to manage the interactions between the different stakeholders, skills to plan and manage development projects, specific knowledge on the country and the sector of intervention. Among Uni.Coo monitoring and evaluation goals, there is precisely the idea of better understanding which knowledge and competences students use and develop during their experience abroad. At the end of their mobility, participants complete an on-line questionnaire, consisting of open and closed questions investigating their overall satisfaction, the quality of professional and personal relationships, the impact of the project, and the most significant experiences of the mobility period. A section of the questionnaire is dedicated to a reflection about the knowledge and the competences developed by participants through their university course and Uni.Coo experience. Here we briefly present the answers to two specific questions: what knowledge-competences, learned in the university course, have been useful in the Uni.Coo experience? What knowledge-competences were learned during the Uni.Coo experience? These questions were open in order not to influence the respondents with a predefined list of competences.

The data here discussed come from 43 questionnaires administered to students (84% female and 16% male) after their mobility experience in 2012 and 2013. The participants have average age of 28 years and are mainly women (75%). 59% of the sample hold a degree, while 25% are master level students and the remaining are PhD students and post doctoral fellows. Most of the respondents (71,5%) have a background in human and social sciences (international or development studies, political science, law, anthropology), 15% in economics and 12% in health sciences. The majority of the respondents were involved in mobility projects proposed by NGOs (41%), while the 29% were involved in projects promoted by the University and the rest in projects promoted by local authorities. Half of the respondents had previous international cooperation experiences.

A significant majority (82%) declares that the knowledge and competences acquired through their university studies have proven useful during the experience abroad. These can be grouped in the

following categories (multiple answers were allowed; Graphic 1):

- methodology of research (19 respondents, 23 answers). The highest percentage of answers (44%) relates to this category that encompasses issues related to planning and implementing scientific research, mastering of research methods and instruments, competences on data collection and analysis;
- technical knowledge related to disciplines of the course of study (12 respondents, 30% of the sample, 24 answers);
- knowledge of the country of destination (7 respondents, 7 answers). The 16% of the respondent affirmed to have used the knowledge and information about the country of destination – general information, history, legal system, culture - acquired during their studies. I.e.: “Indeed having done African studies at the University allowed me to better understand and properly deal with the local context and culture”.
- cross cutting skills and intercultural competences (5 respondents, 10 answers), related to understanding and dealing with different cultural contexts, to cross-cultural communication, and to interpersonal relations. The ability to adapt is also quoted;
- organisational competences (4 respondents, 6 answers). A few mentioned to have resorted to general organisational competences, such as ability to adapt, communication skills and team working;
- foreign language (2 respondents, 2 answers). Only two respondents declared to have used the linguistic competences acquired through their higher education studies;
- project planning and management (2 respondents, 2 answers). Equally only two respondents affirmed to have employed the competences on planning and management of development cooperation projects acquired through their higher education studies.



The Uni.Coo experience has proven useful for the huge majority of the respondents (96%) in terms of development of knowledge and competences. The answers to this open question can be ascribed to the following categories:

- cross-cutting and intercultural competences (15 respondents, 34 answers). The majority of the answers (35%) can be ascribed to this category. Several competences are quoted, such as the ability to relate with people of different cultures, relational competences to deal with specific institutional roles, or brokerage skills between people with different cultural backgrounds. Openness, flexibility and ability to adapt are also quoted. I.e.: “I have strengthened the capacity to live side by side with others in difficult circumstances”, “the encounter with the other”, “The interaction with professional roles different from those I am used to deal with here in Italy”, “The ability of cross-cultural networking”, “The ability to adapt to different cultural and professional contexts”;
- improvement in a foreign language (13 respondents, 12 answers) is quoted as the second most frequent competences outcome of the mobility experience;
- methodology of research (12 respondents, 17 answers). 28% of the answers specify how the mobility experience fosters the development of operational competences linked to field research and the practical aspects of drafting projects and reports. I.e.: “Competences related to different and culture sensitive research methods”, “I implemented qualitative research techniques that I had only studied in theory before”;

- technical knowledge on specific disciplines related to the project (9 respondents, 12 answers). 21% of the respondents affirm that the mobility experience allowed them to deepen and strengthen specific technical knowledge related to their project;
- project planning and management (8 respondents, 11 answers). 19% of the answers refer to competences related to planning and management of development cooperation projects. I.e.: “Monitoring and evaluation of different phases of the project cycle”;
- organisational competences (6 respondents, 8 answers). 14% of the respondents affirm to have improved their problem solving abilities and their capacity to take responsibility and to manage independently a project. I.e.: “I managed independently and directly people and activities”;
- knowledge of the country of destination (4 respondents, 9 answers). Four respondents declare to had the opportunity to become familiar with the country of destination, complementing their initial theoretical knowledge. I.e.: “Understanding social, cultural, economic aspects of a new reality”;
- knowledge of hosting institutions and understanding of professional roles (4 respondents, 9 answers). The 7% of the respondents mention a deeper knowledge of the institution/NGO implementing the project and a clearer understanding of professional roles and tasks in development cooperation activities. I.e. “Somehow I had to invent myself the job of aid worker”, “Understanding how an NGO works”, “Competences related to the role of aid worker”, “Organisational competences with local authorities and NGOs”;

Overall, the responses show a large spectrum of knowledge and competences, both among those acquired during higher education studies and those developed through the mobility experience. Uni.Coo students mainly report methodological and specifically technical knowledge as the most useful acquired during their studies, while the experience abroad offered them the opportunity to deepen and put into practice that knowledge. The development of crosscutting and intercultural competences, as well as of linguistic skills, is the main outcomes of the mobility experience. Relational competences are dovetailed with the intercultural dimension and suggest an overall increase of the openness towards otherness and diversity. Finally Uni.Coo seems to offer an initial socialization with the professional experience in development cooperation. Since the development of crosscutting competences is a central theme in the studies on employability (Fugate, Kimicki and Ashfort, 2004), this might orientate future research on the impact of Uni.Coo on students’ professional careers.

Conclusion

The reflection about Uni.Coo suggests the complementarity between the knowledge acquired in higher education and the competences developed through an experience of international service learning implemented in partnership between the academy, NGOs and local authorities. Students seem to perceive the academy mainly as a provider of technical and methodological knowledge. Through Uni.Coo they get the opportunity to test this knowledge on the field and to further acquire intercultural and relational competences, as well as professional skills to effectively work in international and complex environments such as development cooperation.

This combination might offer a significant opportunity for those universities wishing to promote competences and enabling conditions for global citizens education, particularly in terms of life experiences complementing theoretical knowledge (UNESCO, 2013). In this respect, a joint reflection between scholars and practitioners is needed to identify which are the most suitable knowledge and competences needed to work in development cooperation, to explore their pedagogical implications, and to offer practical opportunities to acquire and develop these competences on the field. These tasks represent a relatively uncharted territory of action research, which also offers the opportunity to renovate the love-hate relationship between universities and NGOs, so far mainly focused on the research dimension (Stevens, Hayman and Mdee, 2013). Projects such as Uni.Coo should engage in this direction by offering spaces and opportunities where professors, NGOs and local authorities representatives can guide the students to reflect and become aware of the knowledge and competences they have used and developed in their mobility experience.

The complementarity between the knowledge acquired in higher education and the competences developed through the Uni.Coo experience also suggests a broader reflection on the relation between university internationalisation and development cooperation. Most of the studies on university internationalisation and academic mobility focuses on the universities as a standalone actors who goes international on its own. This might be also influenced by the fact that university internationalisation strategies and their analysis are mainly inspired by a competitive approach. The experience of the project Uni.Coo recalls that universities are not monads: they belong to a local territory and they might go international in partnership with other actors such as NGOs and local authorities. The data here presented have shown some of the potential benefits of this cooperation.

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Acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge the support of the staff of the International Relations Office of the University of Turin: Rosa Tamburro, Fernanda Negro, Daniela Lauretta, Valeria Sanchini.