

**STUDENTS AND PROFESSORS FOSTERING
INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY COOPERATION.
ANALYSIS OF EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF MYANMAR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS**

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Abstract

The collaboration between the University of Parma, the University of Medicine 1 of Yangon and the General Practitioners' Society of Myanmar, aimed at improving healthcare services in rural areas of Myanmar, has led to the programming of an advanced training course for Myanmar health professionals. In order to organise the course, it was necessary to conduct an in-depth context analysis, realized through the collaboration of students and professors of both contexts.

The synergic collaboration between students and professors proved to be particularly effective, allowing to conduct a comprehensive and original study, and successfully planning the course. A first key factor of the collaboration lied in the interdisciplinary profiles of students and professors involved, which proves to be an extremely important driver in the development and conduction of a cooperation project. A second key factor lied in the constructive exchange between students and professors both vertical exchange, as it concerns the transmission from the professors to the students of knowledge and professional skills, and horizontal exchange, as the meeting between students and professors answered to the transversal objective of the research of producing new competences from an educational, didactic and experiencing point of view.

La collaborazione tra l'Università di Parma, l'Università di Medicina 1 di Yangon e la General Practitioners Society del Myanmar, finalizzata al miglioramento dei servizi sanitari nelle aree rurali del Myanmar, ha portato alla programmazione di un corso di alta formazione per gli operatori sanitari del Myanmar. Per organizzare il corso è stato necessario condurre un'approfondita analisi di contesto, realizzata attraverso la collaborazione di studenti e docenti di entrambi i paesi.

La collaborazione sinergica tra studenti e docenti si è rivelata particolarmente efficace, consentendo di condurre uno studio completo e originale e di programmare con successo il corso. Un primo fattore chiave della collaborazione risiede nei profili interdisciplinari di studenti e docenti coinvolti, che si rivela un driver estremamente importante per lo sviluppo e la conduzione di un progetto di cooperazione. Un secondo fattore chiave risiede nello scambio costruttivo tra studenti e professori, sia scambio verticale, in quanto riguarda la trasmissione dai docenti agli studenti di conoscenze e competenze professionali, sia scambio orizzontale, in quanto l'incontro tra studenti e docenti rispondeva all'obiettivo trasversale della ricerca di produrre nuove competenze dal punto di vista educativo, didattico e sperimentale.

Keywords

Global Health, International Cooperation, Development, Education, Universities

Introduction

International objectives as developed by the United Nations about economic, social and environmental concerns led to the implementation of new international partnerships with the aim to introduce innovative plans for sustainable development (Undp 2019). In this framework,

cooperation between low-middle income and high-income countries is becoming more popular and of interest also with the purpose of strengthening social equity and environmental sustainability.

Usually, international cooperation is introduced by collaborations through National Ministries or international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) which start new projects with the support of economic funds invested for specific actions (Undp 2019-2). To this regard, an important role could be played by the University. Indeed, Universities are considered as strategic institutions in the processes of social inclusion and in the enhancement of public awareness (Stefanini 2013), with cooperation through international Universities having a key role in global markets as graduates are most likely to deal with people from different cultural background (Chan 2004, Ferronato 2018).

Through good cooperation it is possible to do good research, train future professionals and create bonds and connections which are likely to increase the value of the territory, social enrichment and business possibilities. Countries' transition from "south of the world country" to leading country usually happened at fast-pace and, who has been able to build, also through international cooperation, reliable and lasting relations with these realities, has been repaid with positive effects on the local territory.

This is the reason why, over recent years, Italian universities have incremented their activities in the sector of international development cooperation, offering their contribution to stability and democratization processes, also through concrete actions and synergies with other major players, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI). Furthermore, at the Italian level a new national cooperation context is added which, beginning with the law No. 125/2014 "Disciplina generale sulla cooperazione internazionale per lo sviluppo", opens to a framework whereby cooperation becomes an integral and qualifying part of the country's foreign policy.

The cooperation through scholars and the activities structured by University agreements, such as students exchange and sensitivity campaigns, are of utmost importance (Koehn et al. 2011).

Students' participation to cooperation activities contributes in fostering education for global citizenship, which is a pivotal element in shaping citizens capable of positively experiencing globalization (Colombo 2017), facilitates youth participation in determining the policies of our country and of the European Union, promotes among younger generations a new leading role based on conscious and sustainable lifestyles in the vision of being oriented towards the pursuit of internationally shared development goals (Colombo 2017). The world of work increasingly looks for graduates combining technical expertise with transversal skills, such as teamworking, cultural understandings, able of operating in complex contexts and of managing changes.

At the same time, students may also become cooperation's stakeholders (D'Apice 2018). Their active involvement, that can take advantage of the professors' experience, expertise and scientific

knowledge, can spawn concrete research and education initiatives. In addition, students, with their young age and with the awareness of being the potential protagonists of the brighter future that cooperation would like to create, bring new ideas and energy giving new life to Universities development cooperation centres (D'Apice 2018).

Thus, a situation is thereby determined, similar to what in the pedagogical area is defined “Flipped Classroom” with students developing cognitive competences in their extra-university life (o’ Flaherty 2014) and meeting with professors in a collaborative way, whereby professors can act as tutor alongside students (Roach 2014, Gilboy 2015). It is scientifically documented that this didactical approach favours cooperation and innovation (Strayer 2012) and the students can become key actors of cooperation projects.

The case study discussed in this paper aims at analysing the results of a collaboration experience between students and professors in an inter-university cooperation project that, in one of its stages, foresaw a research on the Myanmar health educational needs in the making of an advanced training course for Myanmar health professionals. The goals of the study and the preliminary results of the research have been illustrated during the CUCS Conference, session “Students protagonists” held in Trento (Italy) on the 20th of September 2019.

Case study: Myanmar

The collaboration between the University of Parma (UNIPR) and the University of Medicine 1 of Yangon (UM1) started already in 2016 with the purpose of activating bilateral exchanges of professors and students, joint research and cooperation projects within the health field. One of the cooperation projects started by the interuniversity collaboration with the goal of achieving significant improvement of the quality of healthcare services in rural areas of Myanmar. The project encompasses, among its first actions, the organization by the University of Parma of a training course in family medicine and integrated primary care. Myanmar health professionals will participate in the course. Considering the social and cultural differences between the two nations involved, the preparation of the training programme presumes the reciprocal knowledge of the socio-sanitary contexts, and in particular it presumes that the Italian organizers of the training course have a broad understanding of the training needs of Myanmar health professionals. In order to collect the necessary information to analyze the training needs, it was decided to resort to the exchange program already active between the two universities asking for collaboration to the Italian students going to Myanmar, Myanmar students coming to Italy, and professors of both countries.

Methodology

The research followed an inductive reasoning, developed through the approach of the Grounded Theory that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon (Strauss 1990). It was subdivided in fourth phases.

During the 1° phase, a detailed review of existing literature was jointly conducted by 2 professors and 1 student. The bibliographic research was conducted on the NCBI PubMed, Proquest, and Google Scholar research portals, using as key words: educational need AND health professions; educational need AND primary care; educational need AND family medicine; Myanmar health needs; Myanmar health system. The bibliographic research was coupled with primary and official documents of the Myanmar Ministry of Health and Sports. Moreover, during the 1st phase, students and professors jointly planned the data collection.

During the 2nd phase, following a detailed field-observation conducted by students in Myanmar, two professors proceeded with the defining of a qualitative study design, thereby considering the main health and social elements shaping the Myanmar context as observed by students. In this phase, some interview topics have been selected by tracing a number of questions with the aim of enabling the potential candidate to freely express himself or herself on the subject matter in a detailed way without being guided by the interviewer when answering.

The interview scheme has gauged some areas of investigation:

- Strengths and pitfalls of the Myanmar health system;
- Strengths and pitfalls of the education and training of Myanmar health professionals;
- Myanmar population health needs;
- Educational needs of the Myanmar health professionals;
- Relation between Myanmar health professionals and local population

During the 3rd phase, students conducted, in collaboration with UNIPR professors, interviews to a convenience sample of Myanmar health professionals (physicians, nurses, health assistants), to members of the General Practitioners' Society of Myanmar (GPs) as key informants and to other professionals involved in the project as key informants.

The research has involved 4 Italian adjunct professors of different background – one medical doctor, one sociologist, one nurse, one expert of international relations -, and 15 students of both Italy and Myanmar of different background – students of medicine, students of social policy, students of international relations.

With the purpose of enriching the research, the interviewees were selected also on the basis of the different roles they play, and hence the different competences, within the Myanmar health and

social context. The interviews followed a semi-structured scheme, so as to give the interviewees some already-defined questions to be answered, by leaving them at the same time the choice to go off the track of the interviews, expanding and deepening the themes they preferred to.

Totally, 11 interviews have been conducted following different modalities – three in presence meetings, three through Skype calls, five through emails – depending on the degree of availability of each interviewed person. Thus, students had the chance to personally and concretely experience the use of a qualitative research methodology, bumping into its resources and limitations.

During the 4th phase, the registered interviews have been de-registered verbatim and translated into Italian. Professors and students of different background jointly analyzed the interviews and the grids of observation following a double-blind approach.

Results

The ten Italian students and the five Myanmar students having taken part in the exchanges, have gathered a number of information and enabled to collect preliminary important results. Within the research phase, the collaboration between students and professors was highly advantageous. Indeed, the knowledge derived from the professors' professionalism and experience were extremely useful to identify the thematic areas to be investigated and to define the research questions, while the students' curiosity allowed to explore the educational need theme in all its aspects, also the non-sanitary ones.

The analysis of the results was the crucial phase of the research activity for the professors as it provided technical methods to scientifically unfold the content of the different topics allowing students, after the type coding of interviews, to summarize and synthesize the results according to the subject-matter areas by comparing them with the literature previously analyzed. The research proves to be scientific, as it follows the methodology set by the professors, and innovative, as it concerns several aspects of the health need of Myanmar.

An added value brought by students lied in their different background – medicine, sociology, international relations, and law, which allowed to deepen the subject with several approaches and understandings. For example, it emerged that a training programme in common between the two countries has to consider the different understandings of health, healthcare, sickness and disease, and further, it has to consider the different cultural approach of the patient to the healthcare system. Hence, it has been possible building up a preparatory training programme, that will be attended by Italian and Myanmar healthcare professionals and professors, aimed at the joint planning of the Master that will then be activated in 2020-21. At the same time, the contribution of sociologists,

anthropologists and experts of international relations made it possible to identify some best practices of the Myanmar healthcare system organization as related, for example, to the perception of the quality of the healthcare system that could eventually be transferred and re-adapted to the Italian context as to thereby ameliorate the perceived quality. To this aim, in collaboration with the Emilia-Romagna Region (RER), it has been programmed to activate some Italy-Myanmar study laboratory that will see the participation of professionals of both contexts.

Discussion

International development cooperation so far proved to be non-effective. Indeed, the so called “undeveloped countries” still largely are undeveloped or less developed. In the reshaping of international cooperation aims and strategies, answering to the United Nations sustainable development goals, in the process of favouring social inclusion and enhancing public awareness, the University can play a key role (Stefanini, 2013).

International development cooperation enriches the institutional mission of the University – education and research – giving the University a unique chance to improve training and education, boosting research and implementing the so-called university third mission, thereby including university internationalization (Colombo, 2017). In particular, cooperating with third countries enables the university to enhance its research programs and internationalization activities, while training and education are addressed as students learn from cooperation (Koehn et al. 2011).

The University gathers in itself a peculiar element, that of interdisciplinarity, namely the combining of methods and insights of two or more academic disciplines into the pursuit of a common task, which proves to be an extremely important driver in the development and conduction of a cooperation project.

The establishment of dynamics of cooperation between professors and students has allowed to conduct a comprehensive study and to develop an innovative educational and training path tailored on the needs of Myanmar students. Both students and professors have devoted their time and knowledge in different modalities: on one hand, students went on the field in Myanmar to collect information and hence bringing to the research and to the construction of the educational and training path a point of view innovative and more correspondent to what the expectations of a student could be; indeed, being students in first place undergoing a training path, it is more likely for them to empathize with and individuate the educational needs of a potential Myanmar student.

On the other hand, professors, not having the possibility to easily move to Myanmar, contributed to the research providing valuable knowledge stemming from their experience and professionalism.

The synergy thereby created between students and professors and the exchange of knowledge and competences, has placed the subjects on plans professionally comparable, hence giving the chance to scientifically reflect on the experience. For example, it was detected how in informal settings the meeting between students and professors created the opportunity for professors to probe the translatability of their training and educational tools normally used in didactic contexts. In this way, professors had the chance to verify and better understand the degree of effectiveness in transferring their knowledge to students. On the other hand, for students it was useful to engage in a research experience, but also and above all to contribute with the point of view of students themselves, in the construction of an educational and training path which is addressed to students, even if of different nationalities. For this reason, it has been decided to integrate the course offered in Parma with a period of traineeship. This way, students will have the chance to concretely put into practice the knowledge offered by professors during frontal lessons.

Ultimately, it can be said that there has been an exchange between students and professors: on one hand a vertical exchange, as it concerns the transmission from the professors to the students of knowledge and professional skills; on the other hand a horizontal exchange, as the meeting between students and professors answered to the transversal objective of the research of producing new competences from an education, didactic and experiencing point of view.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the case study, it clearly emerges that the involvement of students in university cooperation projects represents an added value, both to the personal and professional development of students and professors, and to the purposes of the project (Frisch et al 2015).

In the context of cooperation, the relationship between professors and students is enriched and oriented towards a more open-minded dialogue, whereby students and professors can learn one from one another, exchanging knowledge and competences (D'Apice, 2018). University students provide innovative inputs to development cooperation, through the development of fresh and pioneering ideas, the aspiration to get involved and to develop professional and personal competences, hence playing a key role which is of particular importance in such a moment of transition and reconsideration of cooperation. Furthermore, being bearers of an intellectual and cultural dynamism, which is typical of their age, and experiencing an ever more globalized world, students can provide an essential contribution to the understanding of global citizenship and international development cooperation, hence coming to play a new leading role based on conscious and sustainable lifestyles (Colombo, 2017).

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