

**STUDENTS AND PROFESSORS CO-PROTAGONISTS OF INTERNATIONAL
COOPERATION:
AN EXPERIENCE FROM CUCS CONFERENCE**

Clelia D'Apice*, Luigi Hinegk^o, Roberto Valentino*, Gloria Mosca*, Carola Corradini*, Pietro De
Marinis[§], Leopoldo Sarli*, Paolo Carta^o

*Università di Parma, clelia.dapice@unipr.it

^oUniversità di Trento, luigi.hinegk@unitn.it, paolo.carta@unitn.it

[§]Università degli Studi di Milano Statale, pietro.demarinis@unimi.it

Abstract

This paper presents the key issues and the main outputs emerged during the parallel session “Students Protagonists” of the sixth edition of the University Coordination for Development Cooperation (CUCS, Italian acronym) Conference. The session shed lights on the results achieved by universities development cooperation highlighting how new synergic collaborations between professors and students can and should be established to promote a new vision of global citizenship and common goods. In particular, the challenge of the session focused on reporting how students’ participation to university cooperation projects can provide an added value, producing real benefits both for students and for the university too.

Il seguente lavoro presenta le principali tematiche e le relative considerazioni emerse dallo svolgimento della sessione parallela “Studenti Protagonisti” della sesta edizione del convegno della rete CUCS (Coordinamento Universitario per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo). Nello specifico, durante la sessione sono stati presentati e discussi i risultati ottenuti da progetti di matrice universitaria in contesti di cooperazione allo sviluppo, evidenziando come la collaborazione sinergica tra studenti e professori possa promuovere una nuova prospettiva di cittadinanza globale e beni comuni. La sessione si è in particolare concentrata sul discutere come, in progetti universitari di cooperazione allo sviluppo, la partecipazione degli studenti rappresenti un valore aggiunto fondamentale, capace di produrre benefici concreti non solo per gli stessi studenti, ma anche per il mondo accademico nel suo complesso.

Keywords

International development cooperation, academia, education, communication

Introduction

The Italian law recognizes Development Cooperation (DC), human rights and peace as an integral part and qualifying aspect of the Italian foreign policy (l. 125/2014).

In 2006, the General Direction for Development Cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI, Italian acronym) started to promote three main regional academic networks between universities – namely the North, Centre, and South networks – whereby young generation were to play a leading role. As a follow up, within a unique and systematic framework, the University Coordination for Development Cooperation (CUCS, Italian

acronym) was created in 2007, setting a system through which Italian universities can promote development cooperation activities as well as improving their coordination. In addition, the CUCS organization was conceived to strengthen networks of collaboration, thus improving the process of internationalization, also designing specific study tracks addressed to young people and students (Sali 2018). Since the first conference held in Pavia in 2009, every two years CUCS organizes a national conference as one mean to sustain these goals. Throughout its meetings, CUCS became an opportunity for partner universities, in a joint effort with several development cooperation actors, to gather themselves, boost dialogue, share knowledge and improve synergies. More precisely, CUCS conferences have always sought to promote the debate around strategies, policies, and actions starting from a particularly relevant topic, according to the emerging needs of the period. The last CUCS Conference edition, held in Trento (Italy) in September 2019, focused on “Citizenship and Common Goods”, aiming to raise awareness of the ever-increasing importance of such issues within a development cooperation context, both from a local and global perspective.

Aim of the paper

This paper focuses on the key issues and the main outputs emerged during the parallel session entitled “Students Protagonists” of the CUCS 2019 Conference. On one hand, the experiences reported in the session constitute a good example of the interesting results achieved by universities in development cooperation and, on the other hand, they outline shared difficulties. While proving itself perfectly consistent with the conference goals, the session has especially shed lights on those international cooperation experiences where university students represent vital actors, concerning global citizenship and common goods.

The Session “Students Protagonists”

The title of the session, i.e. “Students Protagonists”, aimed at exploring themes concerning the collaboration between professors and students in co-designing, implementing, and analysing results of universities development cooperation activities. Specifically, the main objective of the session was highlighting how the synergic collaboration between professors and students may boost the development of a new vision of global citizenship and the promotion of common goods. Since university by tradition is a community of students and professors, the session confirmed that students are not just “users” but leading actors. In fact, as bearers of a more dynamic and future-oriented idea of citizenship, students can be considered amongst the most powerful expression of

the evolution of the society. In particular, international students, which matriculations in the Italian universities continuously increased in the last ten years (from 12.863 to 15.878 in the period 2010-2019¹) can act as mediating bridge between their hosting society and their country of origin, thus promoting the development of collaboration aimed at reciprocally exchange skills and best practices.

Specifically, reciprocity and plurality have been the key words of the session since cooperation does not mean solidarity. Such leading assumption also reveal the way we think and implement the process of teaching and learning as well as our ideas on academia.

As listed in Table 1, the session “Students Protagonists” received 14 contributions, which were reviewed by the Scientific Committee and subsequently subdivided into oral and poster presentations. The contributions to the session, both in the form of oral and poster presentations, offered a wide view of the key role played by the interplay between students and professors in cooperation activities. Namely, they focused on the following aspects: cooperation as a distinctive feature of the Italian culture, university as a community of professors and students, dialogue between students and professors, and their more well-balanced relationship within the context of cooperation activities.

Oral presentations		
<i>Title</i>	<i>Main Authors</i>	<i>Affiliation</i>
Advanced training course for Myanmar General Practitioners: Context analysis conducted by students	D’Apice, Mosca, Sarli	University of Parma
Cardio-vascular risk factors in Cameroon: Students protagonists	Kougang, Tedah, et al.	University of Parma
Global Health as theatre performance: a masterclass on public awareness with university students	Di Benedetto, Cavagna	Medici con l’Africa CUAMM
Vet for Africa	Gentile	University of Bologna
DéVELO association: an example of students’ involvement in international cooperation between universities	Zoppolato, De Marinis	DéVELO Association
Workshop CHIASMA 2019: a participatory process for S.Martino	Dal Ri	Acropoli

¹ Further data are made available by the Ministry for Instruction, University and Research (MIUR) at <http://ustat.miur.it/>

Poster presentations		
<i>Title</i>	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Affiliation</i>
The “Scalabrini Model” in Uganda	Perucca	University of Pavia
Reflections on a teaching experience of an Italian Professor in the context of Rwandan Civil Engineering Education	Valentino	University of Parma
Thesis Experience: a bridge for new partnership	Pradella, Ragazzi	University of Trento
WamiPura: recovery of ancestral techniques for dyeing wool and natural fibers in North-East Argentina	Pedrazzani, Scali	University of Florence
Pappa di Parma	Corradini	University of Parma
Third mission, education, sustainable development for a supportive citizenship	Vischi	University of Sacro Cuore Milan
Promoting Awareness among professionals: a definition of Citizen Engineer	Castelli, Serrao et al.	University of Florence

Table 1. Oral and poster contributions presented within the session “Students Protagonists” during the CUCS 2019 Conference held in Trento (19-21 September 2019). All submitted abstracts can be found in the Book of Abstract CUCS Trento 2019 Conference².

Results

Starting from its enriching variety of oral and poster presentations, the session “Students Protagonists” resulted in the submission of 5 full papers to the Conference proceedings to this JUNCO issue, thereby outlining the high interest of such topic in the context of development cooperation projects. Indeed, the discussion held after the oral presentations revealed several significant aspects of the university cooperation, coherently with the mission and founding values of the academic world: improving training and education, boosting research, and implementing the so-called university third mission, thereby including university internationalization. In particular, cooperating with third countries enables universities to enhance their research programs and internationalization activities, while training and education are empowered as students learn from cooperation.

The challenge of the session “Students Protagonists” was documenting how students’ participation to university cooperation projects can benefit the entire university and not the students only. Indeed,

² <https://event.unitn.it/cucs2019/BookofAbstracts.pdf>

the exchange of values, norms, cultural habits and best practices that characterize cooperation activities can be all considered as factors that enrich students, professors, and the university as a whole.

In the context of cooperation projects, students become spokespersons of their needs, hence somehow matching the requirements of the so-called “flipped classroom”, a new teaching method that sees the user at the centre of the activity (Bergmann 2012). In other words, the student assumes a central role, while the teaching activity starts from the context and from the student’s needs. This practice shares with international development cooperation a set of specific attitudes. Indeed, these attitudes are related with the willingness to accept the plurality of views on the same issue as well as the openness to interact, in a positive way, with different moral and cultural contexts. Therefore, a good class is considered the perfect environment within which everyone can hone the capability to pose the right questions, make statements, and find solutions, while being aware of the probability of making mistakes. These concepts emerged clearly during the Q&A (Questions and Answers) time of the session.

From an overall analysis of the discussion within the panel, it emerges that, in the context of cooperation, the relationship between professors and students becomes more equal and promote such a more productive dialogue. Furthermore, students become protagonists by playing a role that provides mutual advantages both for them and for the professors. Indeed, students often tend to pose themselves more naturally than professors, from a prejudice- and stereotype-free mind state, thus being capable of acting faster within a project with an open-minded and culture-welcoming approach. The session’s discussion also indicated that, to promote a more active participation of students in cooperation activities, universities need to effectively and adequately communicate with them. Indeed, it is desirable that the participation of students (i.e. academics with age less than 35) in the CUCS Conference should be the highest possible, such in this last edition of Trento, where more than 140 young students, out of a total of nearly 350 participants, attended different conference panels, showing their interest towards development cooperation projects. This academic young core participation was particularly significant within the session “Students Protagonists”, contributing to an enriching discussion. However, from the session’s debate it also emerged how students’ involvement requires appropriate communication strategies. For instance, high schools should be also involved.

Examples from the Session: Oral Presentations

Albeit with some variations, the contributions to the session offered a wide view of the key role played by the interplay between students and professors in cooperation activities. Precisely, the need of reciprocity and synergic effort were especially stressed recalling that university cooperation does not mean solidarity nor charity, but exchange of knowledge and best practices.

The importance of engaging students in university cooperation projects and the fact that their contribution can lead to positive results beyond expectations was initially highlighted by the University of Parma. Specifically, the presentation “Advanced training course for Myanmar General Practitioners: context analysis conducted by students” outlined the pivotal role played by students in conducting a context analysis, in collaboration with professors, finalized at detecting the educational needs of Myanmar health professionals. As students are bearers of students’ needs, their involvement has allowed to detect more easily the educational needs of their Myanmar peers, which have then been analysed in collaboration with their professors. Further, being bearers of an intellectual and cultural dynamism, which is typical of the young age, as well as protagonists of an ever more globalized world, students have provided an essential contribution to the understanding of global citizenship as a common good.

The second contribution offered by the University of Parma, “Cardio-vascular risk factors in Cameroon: Students protagonists”, highlighted that students are key actors not just in the implementation of cooperation actions, but also in the promotion and initiation phases. In particular, Cameroon students of the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery have launched a cooperation research project in collaboration with the professors of the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery of the University of Parma and of the University of Dschang (Cameroon). Within this project, several scientific data were jointly collected by Cameroon and Italian students of the University of Parma during field missions led by Cameroon students at health facilities of the Dschang Region, and later analysed in collaboration with their professors. A potential important interest of the research consists in the possibility of identifying risk factors different from the ones already known for the Italian population that could concern both Italian citizens and the numerous citizens coming from Sub-Saharan countries having residence in Italy. This project, conceived from the initiative of young students, represents an example of the potential of students as international cooperation project designers. This important element has been also highlighted by the presentation made by the Association Acropoli, “Workshop CHIASMA 2019: a participatory process for S.Martino”. CHIASMA is an intense “design and make” workshop, organized by the students-led Association Acropoli on an annual basis. It represents an opportunity for students and young architects to

develop a project through all its phases, from conception, to design, to realization and management. More precisely, the CHIASMA project, being implemented in a local, not international cooperation landscape, such as the district of S. Martino in the city of Trento (Italy), helped to understand which might be the essential concepts and methods for designing a project in which students are able to play a key role. In fact, by implementing a participatory process with the S. Martino local community, CHIASMA showed several common points and approaches with the other international cooperation projects presented during the “Students Protagonists” session. This resulted in highlighting how the concepts of citizenship and common goods can efficiently be implemented both on a global and local level when students have a protagonist role.

The importance of effective and tailored communication in involving students in cooperation initiatives was raised by the non-governmental organization Medici con l’Africa Cuamm. The presentation “Global health as theatre performance: a masterclass on public awareness with university students” pointed out that when communication is aimed at raising awareness on specific scientific issues, with the aim of making people aware of contents and stimulating them to act differently, traditional communication formats are not effective, as they mainly attract people who are already “sensitive” to the topics. Hence, innovative formats of communication, using creativity and culture, are necessary. Specifically, to raise young students’ awareness on global health topics, Medici con l’Africa Cuamm organized a cross-cultural activity in the form of a “global health theatre masterclass”, which proved to be extremely effective as it directly involved students in the construction of the performance, making them closer to the themes and making them act as ambassadors of the project.

The presentation “Dévelo Association: an example of students involvement in international cooperation between universities” made by the Dévelo LCI Association, a student-led association at the State University of Milan, focused on the active role played by students in development cooperation. Following Dévelo LCI reasoning, universities should be able to foster new and smart paradigms in the context of the global crisis. This ability stems from the willingness of each component of the university to discuss, interact and push a community vision and a general asset of values promoting a new sustainable development paradigm. In this perspective, international cooperation allows students to have a first-hand experience of the “delicate theme of human sustainable development”, whereby Dévelo’s role is exactly to support this kind of experience while acting in favour of the academic internationalization. Dévelo’s activities are organized in two directions: development cooperation and global citizenship education. On both sides the organization works according to three main values or concepts: agroecology, as a way of understanding the role of human being on safeguarding the ecological equilibrium, also through

agricultural activities; appropriate technology, meaning the focus on innovations that are sustainable from a socio-ecologic standpoint and the use of participatory methodologies.

The “Vet for Africa” association showed the results of the long-term cooperation activities that the students of veterinary medicine of the University of Bologna carry out in the Hanga Monastery (South Tanzania) starting from 2003. More precisely, during their on-field period, Italian students supported the activities of cattle and chicken farms thanks to the competences and skills acquired during their studies. In addition, thanks to their involvement in the local habits of the village, students were able to promote initiatives, such as courses of hygiene and nutrition, with the aim of improving facilities of the primary school and building the library of the village. The activities of “Vet for Africa” helped students to become skilled professionals and responsible citizens.

Examples from the Session: Poster Presentations

The role of the academic world in the citizenship and common goods perspective was also described by several poster presentations included in the “Students Protagonists” session, highlighting the existence of common themes that emerge when the academic world is involved in a development cooperation project. More precisely, the concept of considering students as bridges between different cultures was described by the presentation “Thesis experience: a bridge for new partnership” (University of Trento). This presentation highlighted the role played by students in acting as bridges between cultures. Indeed, students conducting research for their thesis on the field in the context of cooperation projects, can stimulate the creation of new collaborations between the sending university and the hosting institution.

Students collaboration for common goods was presented by the “Pappa di Parma” poster (L. Speciale, University of Parma). The project “Pappa di Parma”, whose aim is to combat infant malnutrition in the region surrounding the Mvimwa Monastery (Eastern Tanzania), by formulating a hyper-energetic supplementary food with exclusive local ingredients and equipment, foresaw the active involvement of students of the University of Parma, who spent several months on the field to conduct and monitor the development of the project. During their stay in Tanzania, students prepared the meals with ingredients bought at the local market and with rudimentary equipment in order to better understand the potential problems and difficulties that local mothers would have encountered in preparing at home the same baby meals. Students hence had the opportunity to dialogue with local mothers, exploring local food habits as to better tailor the project, and discussing with them the importance of good nutrition education, with the support of their

professors. Further, students, always with the support of their professors, conducted lessons at local primary schools with the aim of teaching children basic concepts of nutrition and food hygiene.

The full role played by students was also presented in the poster “WarmiPura: recovery of ancestral techniques for dyeing wool and natural fibbers in North-West Argentina” of the University of Florence (Natural Resources Management for Tropical Rural Development). Indeed, by creating an integrated team of students coming from different sectors (agriculture, cooperation, marketing, communications, etc.), the rural community of the WarmiPura group was able to boost to organize itself and used its own know-how to be resilient and increase its autonomy. Moreover, the best practices exchanged with the University of Florence members, being aware of the current “global changes” can share new visions and strategies with the local Argentinian community in order to preserve and recover the ancestral techniques for dyeing wool and natural fibbers.

The poster “The ‘Scalabrini model’ in Uganda” presented by the University of Pavia showed the long-term collaboration that religious institutions have with development cooperation and how the university can come into play by interacting with the local community and placing the community itself in the workforce, guaranteeing education, medical treatment and professional training thanks to the business and fundraising activities.

As regards the role played by students, which can provide mutual advantages both for them and for professors, the poster entitled “Reflections on a teaching experience of an Italian professor in the context of Rwandan Civil Engineering Education” (University of Parma), beyond writing a report of teaching/learning activities carried out, aims at explaining the lesson learnt from this experience, by both teacher and students. In fact, the poster reports on the one hand an example of successful experience of a European professor and, on the other hand, the perception by the students, as expressed through an evaluation questionnaire. The students’ opinion will be very useful in planning future activities of the same kind in the field of cooperation.

Discussion and Conclusions

The session “Students Protagonists” showed how an international cooperation project should always support a synergic interplay between students and professors, thus designing a project according to a reciprocal and well-balanced dialogue between the different (academic and non-academic) actors involved. This interplay should be cultivated starting from frontal lectures, where students can have an open dialogue with their professors and develop ideas for an efficient international cooperation project design. Then, students and professors should continue to work as co-protagonists by some field experience, that can be undertaken in any context where there is the

possibility to exchange of knowledge and best practices synergistically. This approach was discussed within the “Students Protagonists” session by focusing on the citizenship and common goods topics, highlighting the essential aspects that one should consider when implementing an international cooperation project in which the academic world is involved.

More precisely, three main key-messages (KM) can be highlighted by the “Students Protagonists” session: (KM i) cooperation activities as distinctive feature of the Italian culture, (KM ii) the need to recover and develop on new basis the relationship between students and professors and (KM iii) the existing synergy between students’ course of studies and development cooperation is more than a matter of academic internationalisation.

Specifically, the KM (i) stresses the valuable traditional experience of universities in international cooperation by promoting projects between and within universities. In this sense, the CUCS network should be considered as a fundamental communication channel to increase and develop innovative and integrated development cooperation projects, thus reinforcing its role as a nation-wide reference network for development cooperation.

In terms of the KM (ii), in order to recover and develop on a new ground the relation between students and professors, the university should retrieve its original identity of being a community of students and professors. The place where this relationship should be pursued is within the context of cooperation projects, where the relation between students and professors is more horizontal. This is basically due to the fact that both students and professors play in an unknown context when they are in a “foreign” environment. However, the unknown context can raise the complementary abilities and attitudes of students and professors. Indeed, while students are free from prejudices and constructs as adapt faster to cultural and social evolution, professors have the valuable experience to manage a development cooperation project, guiding the innovative proposals made by the students. In this way, the relationship between students and professors is – or can become – synergic.

KM (iii) indicates that to involve an always increasing number of students it is extremely important to learn how to correctly and effectively communicate with them.

The three main key-messages of the session “Students Protagonists” just described can be considered as desirable learning outcomes and can be pursued in a joint vision: by looking to the valuable and long-term Italian tradition in development cooperation projects (KM i), the synergic interplay between students and professors can be recovered and developed (KM ii), giving importance to the pivotal role played by students (KM iii) as they are capable of advancing innovative added values and best practices to address a development cooperation project.

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