

Students' mobility in the framework of development cooperation projects in the Global South. Insights from the project Uni.Coo (UniTo for International Cooperation)

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Uni.Coo (Unito for International Cooperation) is a mobility project of the University of Turin that aims to stimulate the engagement of students in international cooperation, promote initiatives and efforts towards sustainable development in least developed countries. Furthermore Uni.Coo raise engagement and critical contribution of University of Turin's researchers in international development cooperation, and share competences and knowledge among University of Turin, other actors of development cooperation in Piedmont region and Italy and partners (Universities, local and national governments, international organizations, NGOs in the Global South). Uni.Coo has three main features. First, it is inspired by an **idealist understanding of university internationalization**, emphasizing the responsibility of educating good and morally conscious citizens (Stier 2010).

Second, it adopts a **territorial and community engaged approach** (Bourke 2013) 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, 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 e Flamm 2013).

Uni.Coo: actors and process

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 strength collaboration with local organizations, institution and universities, which are, together with the students, the main beneficiaries of the program. 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.

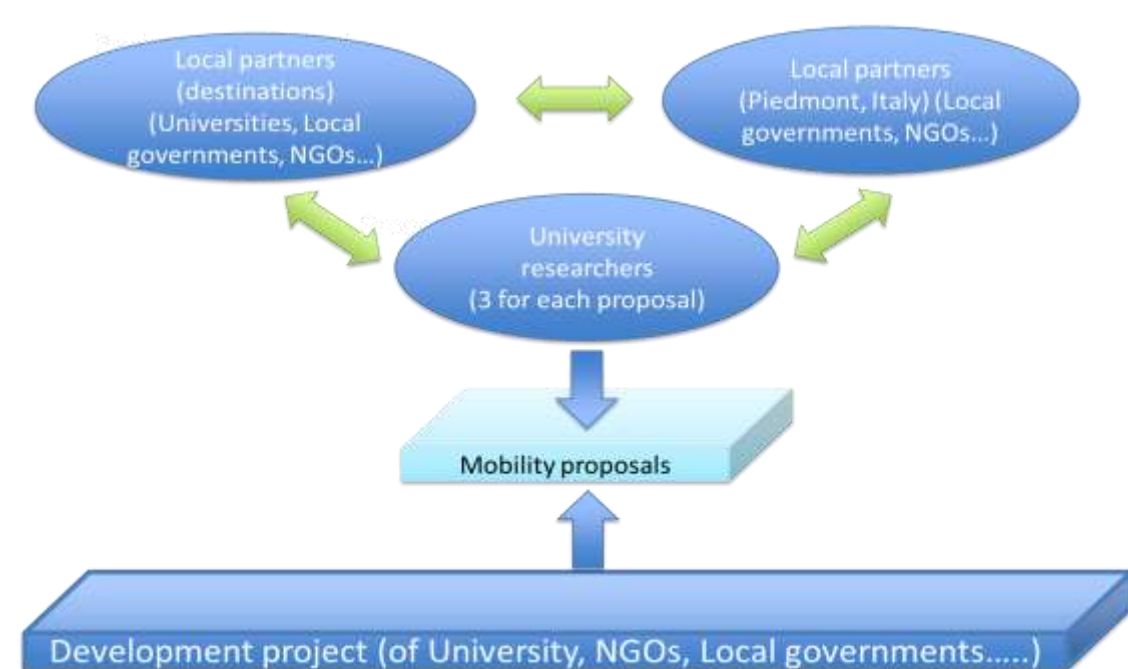


Fig 1: Actors and process in Uni.Coo project

Knowledge and competences in Uni.Coo

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 (on the basis of the data of 43 questionnaires administered to the students who participated to Uni.Coo in 2012 and 2013): 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. A significant majority (82%) declares that the knowledge and competences acquired through their university studies have proven useful during the experience abroad. Similarly The Uni.Coo experience has proven useful for the huge majority of the respondents (96%) in terms of development of knowledge and competences.

Students' responses (see graphic 1) suggest the **complementarity** between the knowledge acquired in higher education and the competences developed through an experience of international service learning. Students 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.



Monitoring and evaluation

Uni.Coo represents for many students the **first working experience** in complex, multicultural and often uncomfortable environments. Consequently, besides rewarding experiences and positive research outcomes, since the very beginning, several challenges emerged in the case of specific research projects, both at macro level (political instability, deteriorating security conditions, epidemic outbreaks...) and micro scale (difficulties in interpersonal relationship, misunderstanding on the project arrangements, logistics and material issues). All these elements pointed at the need to strengthen Uni.Coo monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and contribute to the planning of the University of Turin development cooperation strategies, policy and activities. Thus, before and after their mobility experience, participants complete an **on-line questionnaire**, consisting of open and closed questions investigating their expectations, their overall satisfaction, the quality of professional and personal relationships, the impact of the project and the most significant experiences of the mobility period.

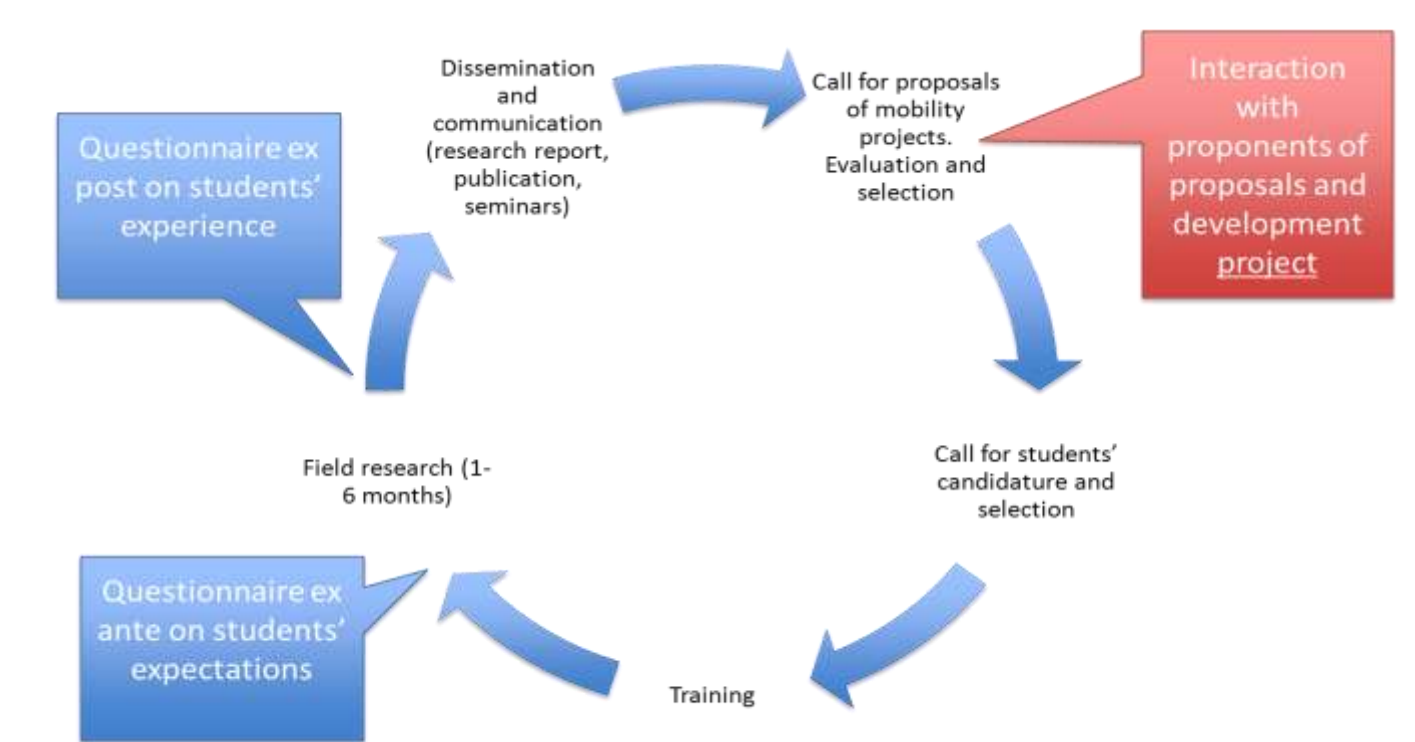
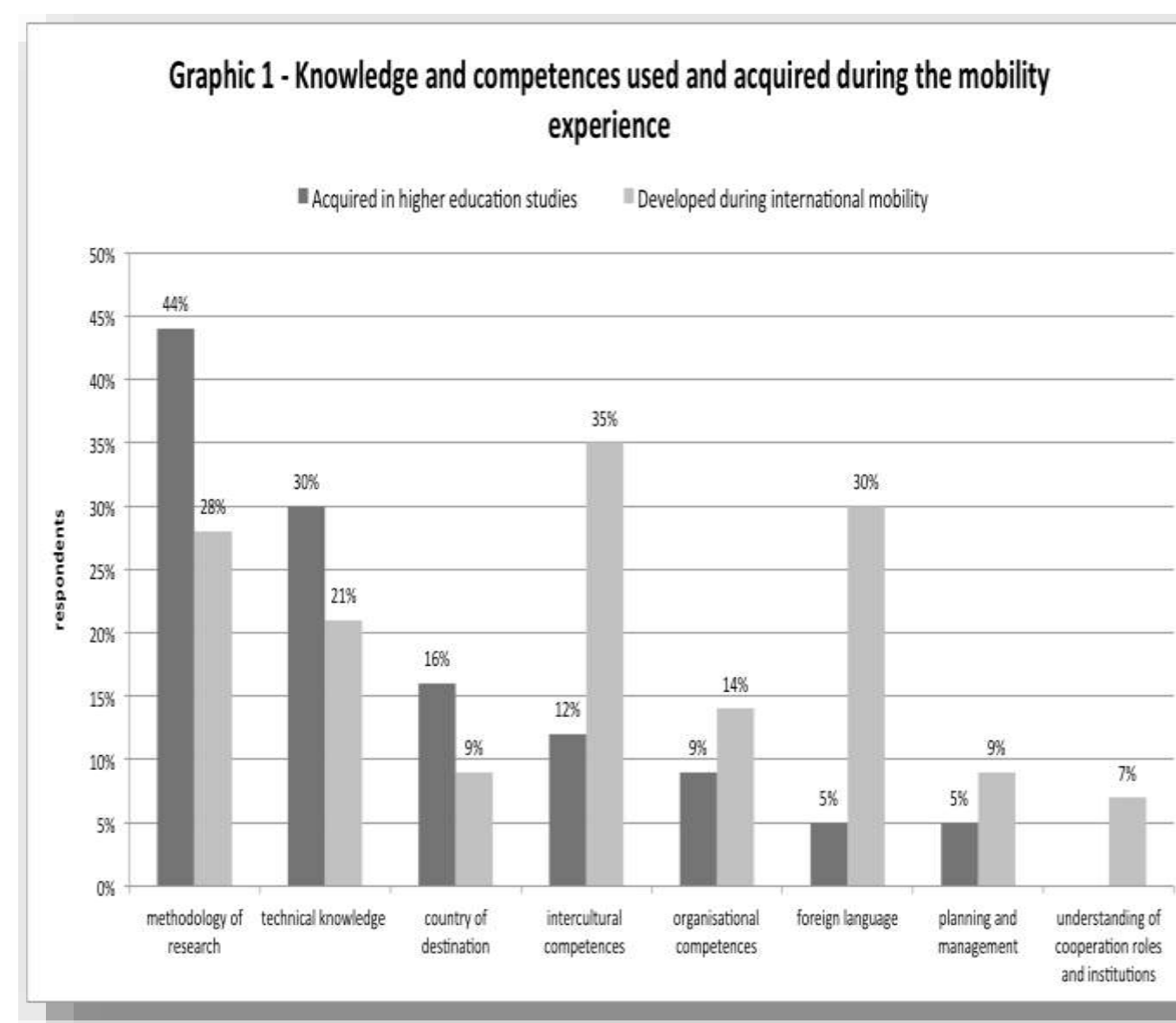


Fig 2: Uni.Coo process



Positive and negative experiences

In another section of the questionnaire students were asked to describe the **most significant positive and negative episodes** they experienced during their mobility abroad. The goal is to understand which are the main factors behind the success of the mobility experiences and student's satisfaction about it.

Episodes can be grouped under three main categories:

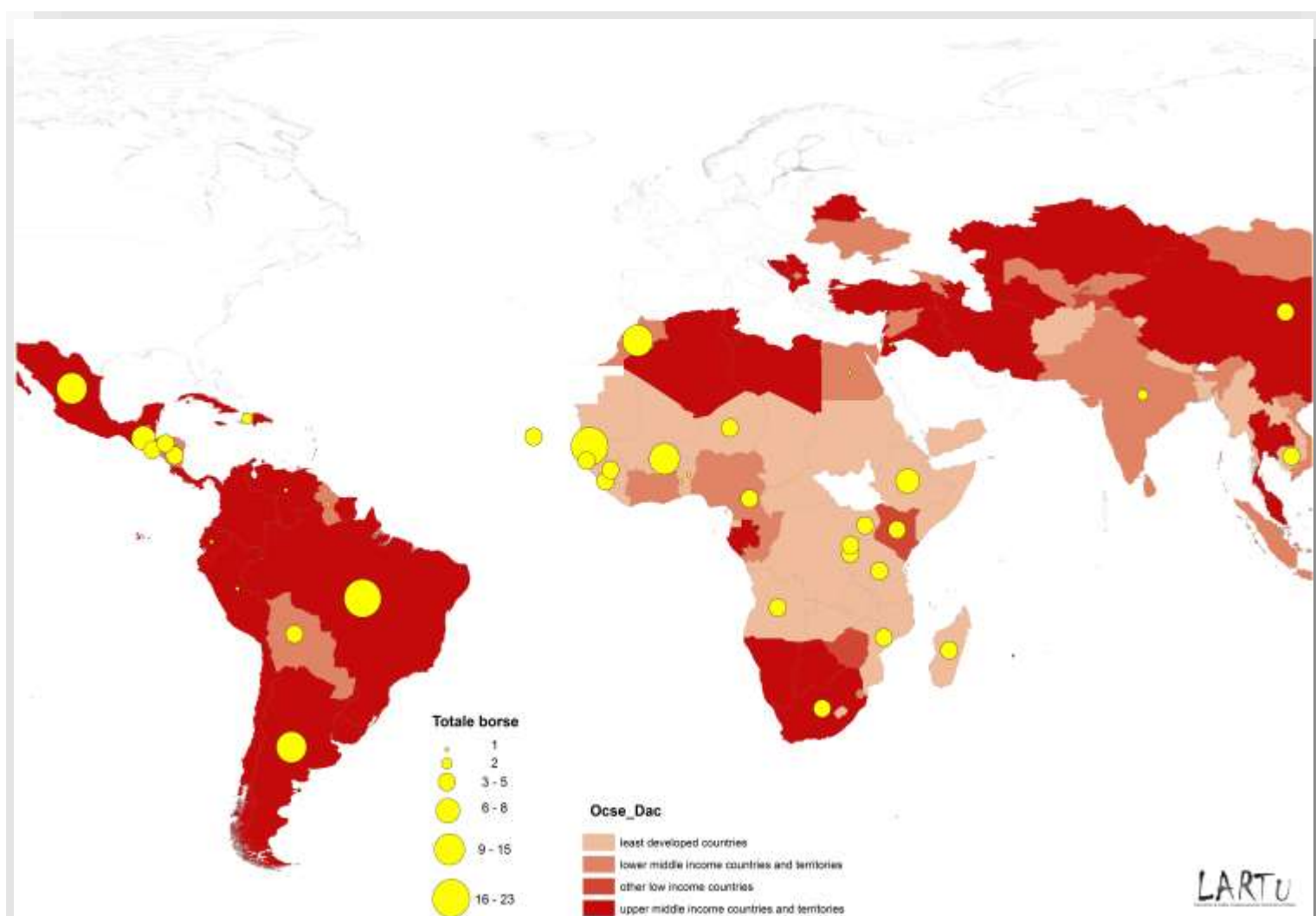
- 1) Achievements:** students describing practical rewards, positive outcomes and significant impact, both immediate and long terms, of their work and research;
- 2) Relationship:** students emphasise the importance of the interpersonal relationship with their academic supervisors, the staff of the NGOs or other institutions involved in the project, colleagues and project's beneficiaries;
- 3) Transition:** students refer episode of transition, involving both physical and symbolic elements (such as a fieldtrip in remote areas or the farewell by friends and colleagues at the airport).

Evenly, the three main categories encompassing negative episodes are

- 1) Low impact:** students expressing frustration about being not perceived as a resource for the project/activity/research or about the low impact the work they carried on, especially if compared to the magnitude of the development/poverty issues they tried to address;
- 2) Relational challenges:** students reporting episodes of interpersonal conflicts, lack of communication and collaboration with colleagues and supervisors, linguistic barriers, cross-cultural differences and misunderstandings;
- 3) Uncertainty:** students reporting logistic and organisational problems related to the implementation of their research (i.e. my supervisor and/or colleagues were not aware of my role and my project), accidents, hindrances or problem related to the security in the country of destination).

Both in the case of positive and negative episodes, by far the great majority of the answers fall under the second categories, related to the relationships dimension: students seem to conceive their mobility experience and development cooperation in broader terms firstly and foremost as a relational experience. The links and networks – or the lack of them – they manage to create and reinforce become thus crucial in determining the success and the satisfaction for the mobility experience.

Map 1: Uni.Coo world and geography cooperation according to OCSE-DAC



The project begun in 2012 and up to September 2015 has granted 178 mobility scholarships to 40 countries (23 in Africa, 13 in Latin America, 4 in Asia, see map). An additional round of 40 scholarships is scheduled for 2016. Uni.Coo is open to master level, post-graduate, PhD students, residents and post-doctoral fellows from all University's Departments.

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Conclusion

The data here presented on

- the complementarity between the knowledge acquired in higher education and the competences developed through the mobility experience on the field;
- students' emphasis on the relational dimension of development cooperation highlight the need to engage a further reflection between scholars and practitioners in order 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.

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