



Report

A MORE THAN USEFUL COOPERATION OF THE TRAKIA UNIVERSITY AND THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON UNDER THE ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: The aims of this Erasmus+ are to establish an academic partnership, to exchange practice in teaching and research. In September 2016 was signed an inter-institutional agreement for staff mobility for teaching between the University of Southampton, UK and Trakia University, Bulgaria for the period 2016-2021. Assoc. Prof. Dr Borislav Dimitrov, a former colleague from Stara Zagora working at the University of Southampton and Assoc. Prof. Katya Peeva from the Medical faculty were the contact persons for this contract.

RESULTS: Until the year 2020 in the program have participated six professors from the University of Southampton, who delivered lectures and courses to teaching staff at Trakia University "Introduction into Biostatistics with R" and "Medical Statistics using SPSS". From the Medical Faculty the participants were four professors with lectures, seminars, posters and taking part as a teaching assistant in a statistical course at the University of Southampton.

CONCLUSIONS: Assoc. Prof. Dr Borislav Dimitrov created a fantastic opportunity. The plus in Erasmus+ signifies learning as more than just an academic exercise. I'm sure that Borislav would have hoped we learn that academic endeavour and partnership could be an area able to rise above the differences between individual countries.

Key words: Erasmus, staff mobility, teaching, medical statistics, public health and epidemiology

*I dedicate the present work to my colleague
and close friend Dr Borislav Dimitrov*

THE BEGINNING

In September 2014, during a visit of Dr Borislav Dimitrov in Stara Zagora in a friendly conversation between me and him, the idea was born to sign a contract under the Erasmus+ program between the University of Southampton, where he worked and Trakia University. Since our specialty is Social Medicine and medical Statistics, the proposal was the contract to be with the Department of Social Medicine and Health Management. Dr Borislav Dimitrov graduated from the Faculty of Medicine, Stara Zagora in 1991 and in the same year won a competition for the position

of an assistant in the same department, where he worked until 1996.

He had great creative ideas, was extremely talented in medical statistics and therefore later continued in this field his scientific career in Italy, later in Ireland and Great Britain. Everywhere he made numerous connections with colleagues, worked on several projects simultaneously. He was a warm and engaging colleague, immensely proud of his Bulgarian heritage, and maintained professional relations with his colleagues. His thoughtful advice and expertise were much in demand and he was very generous with his time to junior researchers and medical students alike.

As a result of his initiative, within the following 2 years we, as contact persons for both universities, did everything possible, and in September 2016 a contract for Erasmus+ exchange programme for teaching mobility

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was signed for the period 2016-2021, ERASMUS+ Program / BG STARA-Z01 (2016-2021) between the Research Institute of Statistical Sciences in Southampton and the Department of Social Medicine and Health Management at the Medical Faculty of Trakia University in Stara Zagora.

AIMS

The aims of this Erasmus+ link are:

- To establish an academic partnership in medical statistics, public health and epidemiology.
- To observe and exchange practice in teaching and research.
- To explore the opportunities for exchange of postgraduate students and junior researchers.

THE PARTICIPANTS

As the first participant in the role of lecturer in medical statistics at the University of Southampton, I had a very short time to prepare and deliver the necessary lectures. In the University of Southampton, I had a lot of fruitful meetings with colleagues with common interests, professionals in the fields of medical statistics and public health. I conducted several lectures and seminars with teachers, scientists and medical students, and they were met with interest. This was the first acquaintance with Bulgaria for most of them and they were interested in the opportunities for joint cooperation. The presentations of Bulgarian history and culture were interesting to them. I also attended lectures of statisticians, intended for teachers and scientists and medical statistics lectures intended for students, all of them were of immense interest to me. Additionally, as a start to successful collaboration, I established useful relations with the colleagues who attended my lectures and seminars.

I had an interesting meeting with Dankmar Böhning, Professor of Medical Statistics and Director of the Southampton Statistical Sciences Research Institute, University of Southampton, with whom our Erasmus+ contract was signed. We talked about teaching medical statistics and our experiences with it, programs and mutual interests.

During the course of my lecture on medical statistics to medical students there, they exhibited an interest in Bulgaria. The following year the students who attended my lecture were already studying at the Faculty of Medicine and shared that the information about

Bulgaria had been crucial to them to come to our country and university. Other medical students from the English language course at Trakia University also had received good reviews for their studies in Bulgaria a year earlier exactly from Borislav. They shared their impressions of studying in Bulgaria and the Erasmus+ program at a lecture organized by colleagues from the University of Southampton at the Medical Faculty of Stara Zagora.

Thus this is how people meet! Borislav had aroused interest in the Medical Faculty in Stara Zagora among students of Southampton. Often my English medical students feel very good about our connections with the University of Southampton, one of the six most prestigious universities in the UK.

As part of my visit to Southampton I was brought on a tour of wonderful places, both in the city and in Winchester. It was organized by Prof. Paul Roderick. Southampton is the capital of South England and one of the world's largest natural harbours; a cherished cultural and historical centre, with a population of over 200 thousand inhabitants. Known as the "cruise capital of Europe", Southampton welcomes over 4 million visitors each year. Southampton's medieval walls dating back to the 14th century are the third-longest continuous walls in Britain. St. Michael is a beautiful medieval church in Southampton, built in the 11th century that preserves Norman relics and also boasts a beautiful marble fountain made in the Belgian city of Tournai.

Winchester is a very old town near Southampton, with an extremely rich history. In the Middle Ages, it was a market town and capital of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex, a major religious and commercial centre. Its main attraction is the Winchester Cathedral. Its construction began in 1089, leading to its transformation into Europe's longest medieval cathedral (170 m), famous for its twelve-nave nave (an elongated room, part of the interior). It is one of the largest cathedrals in England, built on the ruins of a Saxon stone church. The cathedral has inspired many world-renowned artists and there were shot scenes from the film "The Da Vinci Code" based on Dan Brown's bestseller. Another landmark is the house where famous writer Jane Austen lived and wrote many of her greatest works.

Paul Roderick, Professor of Public Health, and Dr Simon Fraser, clinical lecturer in Public Health of the Academic Section of Primary Care and Population Science of University of Southampton returned the visit to the Medical Faculty. They presented a number of curious lectures to professors, PhD's and students. One of the topics was a comparison of health systems between the UK and Bulgaria, for which Paul had found a lot of statistical information about Bulgaria and the presentation was extremely interesting for those present. Other topics addressed health inequalities, some public health challenges and prospects for public health in the UK, especially in relation to alcohol being a global problem and a public health challenge. An exciting topic was the professors' experience in using linked routine data in health research, with which they work on research projects. Simon also presented research related to his doctoral degree and programs of the National Institute for Health Research in the UK.

Paul and Simon enjoyed being acquainted with cultural and historical landmarks of Stara Zagora, tours of which were organized during their visit. They expressed great interest during the visit of the Neolithic dwellings, which date back to the Neolithic Age, 8000 years ago. The museum preserves a two-storey dwelling from the 6th century BC, with furnishings and utensils that were used back then. At the museum is also preserved the oldest marble figure found in the Bulgarian lands from the VI century BC. It is of a female body, together with numerous artefacts from this and later times, found in the area of Stara Zagora and its surroundings. We took a walk along the alleys of the beautiful Ayazmoto Park, got acquainted with its history. Plovdiv and its ancient neighbourhood were an addition to their acquaintance with Bulgarian history and culture. The professors understood why Borislav, their Bulgarian colleague, was so proud of his Bulgarian origin. We gained new admirers of our culture and history! In the following 2017/18 academic year, I participated as a lecturer at the University of Southampton and was included as an assistant to Professor Dankmar Böhning in Southampton Statistical Sciences Research Institute on his three-day intensive course Advanced Statistical Methods in Epidemiology. At the request of the teachers

and research staff at the Academic Unit of Primary Care and Population Sciences, I presented a seminar on Measures Of Screening Accuracy Tests and Health System in Bulgaria & Screening Programs. The topic of screening programs in Bulgaria was met with great interest and provoked numerous questions and comments. The colleagues expressed a desire to meet and talk with their Bulgarian colleagues in the field of social medicine, which was carried out during the following school year.

In early June 2018, Prof. Dankmar Böhning, Dr Helen Ogden, Prof. Ruth Pickering visited the Faculty of Medicine at Trakia University and conducted a three-day course "Introduction into Biostatistics with R" with the participation of 12 lecturers and PhD students, which was received with great interest and gratitude. The participants were from different faculties of Trakia University.

Our colleagues from the University of Southampton had fruitful meetings with professors and PhD students from the Faculty of Medicine in the Department of Social Medicine and Public Health. They welcomed with interest the acquaintance with cultural and historical landmarks of Stara Zagora, which were organized during their visit.

Prof. Ruth Pickering had had a preliminary discussion with colleagues from the Academic Unit of Primary Care and Population Sciences at the School of Medicine at the University of Southampton, such as Prof. Paul Roderick and Prof. Julie Parkes. Prof. Julie Parkes is Head of the School of Primary Care, Population Sciences and Medical Education and Professor of Public Health within Medicine at the University of Southampton. Their proposal for opportunities for further exchange of visits was for our colleagues to visit Southampton, with the intention of discussing plans for joint research. When people discover common interests, this can lead to joint research, and sharing ideas will be helpful in setting up research projects in Stara Zagora and Southampton. During these visits, time could be found for meetings and discussions of similar scientific methods. A certain wish was expressed by the colleagues at Southampton to visit Bulgaria again and meet with lecturers from the Medical Faculty in Stara Zagora.



This led to the next visit to Southampton of social medicine colleagues Prof. Juliana Marinova, Assoc. Prof. Boryana Parashkevova and Dr Peter Atanasov in the 2018/19 school year. They held seminars in the Academic Unit of Primary Care and Population Sciences where they shared their experience in teaching Social Medicine and Medical Ethics for medical students, as well as topics from their research areas. The seminars aroused interest in their long years of extensive experience in working on joint projects in the field of promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and especially for vulnerable groups in society.

With very good organization, a number of interesting professional meetings with colleagues working in the field of public health were held. They had the opportunity to participate in a critical discussion of research projects, as an innovative good practice in research. Bulgarian colleagues participated with posters in the annual Wessex Public Health Conference, organized at the University Hospital Southampton at that time.

In early April 2019, Prof. Ruth Pickering and Brian Yuen from the University of

Southampton visited the Faculty of Medicine and conducted a three-day course "Medical statistics training program using SPSS" with the participation of 17 lecturers and PhD students. The course was a great success! It included key points for working with the IBM SPSS Statistics software package needed by lecturers and PhD students in their research work. The most frequently used statistical analyses were reviewed and discussed in detail, demonstrated by interesting examples from their practice and scientific publications. During their visit, we organized another tour of cultural and historical landmarks of Stara Zagora and the region, with traditional Bulgarian food and drinks. Our guests even wanted to see and visit some students' facilities. All of these events were met with curiosity and gratitude by Ruth and Brian.

LESSONS LEARNED

Over the past three academic years, we have worked hard to meet the goals of Erasmus+ and we have succeeded. All programme participants were involved in seminars, workshops and continuing professional development activities during their participation in Erasmus+. With this we all

have expanded our knowledge and experience, we have benefited from mutual exchange of ideas, vision and additional prospects for professional development.

Unfortunately for all of us, a few months after the signing of the contract in 2016, Borislav left us forever. He could not participate in the project he had planned. This happens sometimes to people with great ideas who do their best to make things happen mostly for others and just burn out doing so. His ideas and suggestions remained, the established connections between the two universities remained.

As a close colleague and friend of his, Prof. Paul Roderick, wrote: "Borislav was passionate about clinical research and teaching and has achieved a lot in his academic career. Organized and reliable, he uses his clinical knowledge in both applied and biomedical research and has established collaborations with leading clinicians in Southampton, Dublin, Bulgaria, Italy and the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Borislav's efforts to make the Erasmus+ staff mobility for the teaching programme happen are highly appreciated by all participants. The programme provides opportunities to expand the internationalization strategy of the University of Southampton and Trakia University.

I am sure that Borislav hoped for us to learn that academic effort and partnership can be an area that can rise above our individual differences of location and origin.

As a thank you to Borislav's family, friends and colleagues for everything he did, for their hospitality during his visits to Stara Zagora, Prof. Paul Roderick exclaimed: "Borislav created a fantastic opportunity! The advantage of Erasmus+ is learning as more than just an academic exercise. Gratitude to Borislav's family, friends and colleagues for their hospitality!"

Thank you very much, Borislav, for proposing and doing your best to make this relationship a reality!