

USING EDUCATIONAL NETWORKS TO PROMOTE INTERNATIONALIZATION EXPERIENCES IN PHYSIOTHERAPY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Introduction and Objectives: The Academic Network of Health Sciences of Lusofonia (RACS - racslusofonia.org) was created in 2016, with the mission of promoting training and scientific cooperation in health sciences, between higher education institutions and research centers in different countries and Portuguese speaking communities. Within the Physiotherapy Education Group of RACS we develop a project with a set of activities, developed along the academic path of the physiotherapy students, which allow them to be exposed progressively to the international context. **Methods:** During the 2021/22 academic year, 10 institutions involving 103 Physiotherapy students from 6 different countries (Portugal, Brazil, Mozambique, Cabo Verde, Angola, and São Tomé e Príncipe) participate in this project. Students are asked, over a period of 2 months, to carry out at least 2 online meetings within an international group to discuss topics related to the reality of education and the practice of Physiotherapists. As a result, students submit an individual reflection on the most relevant points that were identified in this sharing process. In each of the participating institutions, there was a teacher responsible for preparing, supporting, and evaluating the students' reflections. **Results:** To assess the impact and satisfaction of the students with activity, an online questionnaire (10 questions) was used, with several dimensions (preparation, performance, and global opinion) where a response rate of 83% was obtained (n=86). Regarding the answers, 93% considered that the objectives of the activity were clear and attainable and that the support materials were adequate (83%). Regarding meetings with international peers, 70% said that communication was easy during the meetings and that the proposed objectives were achieved (91%). Concerning the impact of the activity, 94% considered that the activity contributes to a better understanding of the international context of teaching and practice of physiotherapists, stressing that it should continue to be carried out within the scope of the physiotherapy course (89%). **Conclusion(s):** The overall reflexion from the students and teachers involved was very positive, reinforcing the importance of this activity and identifying areas of improvement related to student recruitment and support throughout this process. Based on the results, it seems important for us to carry out this project as it facilitates students' early exposure to international contexts, which may facilitate the development of skills that allow them to play a more active and global professional role.

Keywords: Educational networks, Internationalization, Physiotherapy Students.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the constantly changing global landscape, the world has evolved into an interconnected system in which international collaboration is considered a vital component. Exchange programmes have surfaced to establish partnerships between higher education institutions (HEIs) across borders, with technology playing a key role in supporting these cooperative activities. Therefore, an increasing number of students and professionals participate in collaborations with international partners such as academic institutions, clients, and customers. This has led to internationalisation and globalisation having a notable impact on the employment market and professional life.

To adapt and succeed in an international environment, individuals need to develop new and additional competencies. Educational institutions have acknowledged this necessity, often incorporating international and intercultural competencies into their curricula to equip students for the challenges of the global context [1]. For example, various physiotherapy education programmes have included international experiences in their curriculum design, enabling students to gain global health knowledge.

These international experiences not only provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of diverse health practises and approaches but also help meet clinical education requirements [2]. As a result, students' perspectives on healthcare delivery are broadened, allowing them to recognise the subtleties of different cultural contexts and expand their professional horizons. Consequently, these globally oriented graduates are better prepared to contribute to an increasingly interconnected world, improving the quality of healthcare and fostering cross-cultural understanding within their respective professions.

For the higher education institutions internationalization also offers several advantages, which include:

- **Strengthening academic programs:** Campus internationalization can enhance the quality of academic programs, leading to a brighter future for our globalized world. It fosters collaboration between institutions, encouraging the exchange of knowledge and best practices, thereby promoting academic excellence [3].
- **Economic benefits:** Internationalization can have positive economic impacts on both host countries and institutions. In the short term, international students contribute to the economy through their living expenses. In the long term, these students can join the domestic workforce, strengthening the knowledge economy [4].
- **Increased cultural understanding:** The presence of international students and faculty can foster greater cultural understanding and appreciation, promoting tolerance and inclusivity. This helps prepare students for a multicultural community at home and in the globalized world [5].
- **Enhanced global connections:** Internationalization connects institutions, staff, and students with the global environment, providing them with opportunities to network and collaborate with peers worldwide. These connections can lead to research collaborations, joint programs, and other mutually beneficial initiatives [6].
- **Curricular changes:** Studies have shown that internationalization leads to curricular changes that better reflect the global context, equipping students with relevant knowledge and skills to navigate an interconnected world [7].
- **Institution-level planning:** Internationalization encourages higher education institutions to engage in strategic planning that takes global factors into account, ultimately enhancing their overall competitiveness and adaptability [7].

One of the ways that HEI can develop Internationalisation is to be part of International Education Networks because it enables institutions to collaborate and share knowledge, which can lead to the development of new research, innovation, and best practices in higher education [6]. Networks also expose institutions, faculty, and students to diverse perspectives, enriching the learning experience and promoting a greater understanding of global issues and cultures [8]. Also encourages collaboration between disciplines, addressing complex global challenges that often require interdisciplinary [9].

The Rede Académica das Ciências da Saúde da Lusofonia (RACS) [10] is a collaborative network of academic institutions focused on health-related research, education, and training. It was founded in 2007 with the primary goal of promoting and strengthening cooperation between higher education and research institutions in Portuguese-speaking countries. The RACS network aims to improve the quality of health education and research in the Lusophone space by facilitating knowledge exchange and promoting collaborative research projects. This is accomplished through various initiatives, including the organization of conferences, seminars, and workshops on health-education topics. RACS is composed of member institutions from Angola, Brazil, Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Timor-Leste. Within the network exists several working groups, each focused on specific areas of health research and education.

2 METHODOLOGY

Within the Physiotherapy Education Group of RACS we develop a project called “Pontes Atlânticas” with a set of activities, developed along the academic path of the physiotherapy students, which allow them

to be exposed progressively to the international context. So, during the 2021/22 academic year, we implemented the project, that involved 103 physiotherapy students from 10 institutions across 6 different countries (Portugal, Brazil, Mozambique, Cabo Verde, Angola, and São Tomé e Príncipe). Over a period of 2 months, students were tasked with participating in at least 2 online meetings within an international group to discuss the following dimensions (Fig. 1):

- Personal Dimension: In this topic the students shared personal aspects such as family context, hobbies, living environment, employment, current COVID-19 situation.
- Educational Dimension: In this dimension the participants addressed questions related to physiotherapy education, including time devoted to the course, duration of studies, first-year topics, format of classes, division of responsibilities in the learning process, assessments, activities/tasks as a student, participation in mentoring or tutoring, research activities, reasons for choosing the profession, professional context preferences for placements, and future areas of interest.
- Professional Dimension: In this dimension the students discussed the description of Physiotherapy in the respondent's country, scope of intervention, future development of the profession, level of autonomy, number of physiotherapists and/or physiotherapist/population ratio, access to the profession.

Subsequently, students submitted an individual reflection on the most relevant points identified during this sharing process. In this reflection task, the student analysed the peer meetings held with the partner institution students. This analysis involved reflection on the personal, educational, and professional dimensions of the meetings.

For the personal dimension, the student describes the rest of the peers based on the interview script. The student focused on aspects such, as the academic year, family context, leisure activities, and living context. Additional information beyond the script's guidelines could also be included.

In the educational dimension, the student presented the information collected from the partner institution student(s), considering the questions they asked. This covered topics such as time dedicated to the course, duration of the Physiotherapy course, subjects taught in the first year, teaching and exam weeks, vacation weeks, characterisation of teachers, and activities requested from students.

For the professional dimension, the student analysed the information about the country where the partner institution student studies, this included the description/definition of Physiotherapy, the scope of intervention, perceived future development of the profession, level of autonomy, current number of physiotherapists and/or their physiotherapist/population ratio, and access to the profession.

In the critical analysis section, the student reflected on the educational and professional dimensions to identify distinguishing aspects of the various realities, comparing their situation to that of their exchange partner(s). They also considered how the activity might have contributed to their development as a student and promoted a national and international perspective of physiotherapy education and practice.

Finally, in the conclusion, the student summarised the process and reflections made, highlighting the positive and negative aspects of participating in the Atlantic Bridges project. They also offered proposals for future activities and suggestions for improvement. Within each participating institution, a designated teacher was responsible for preparing, supporting, and evaluating the students' reflections.

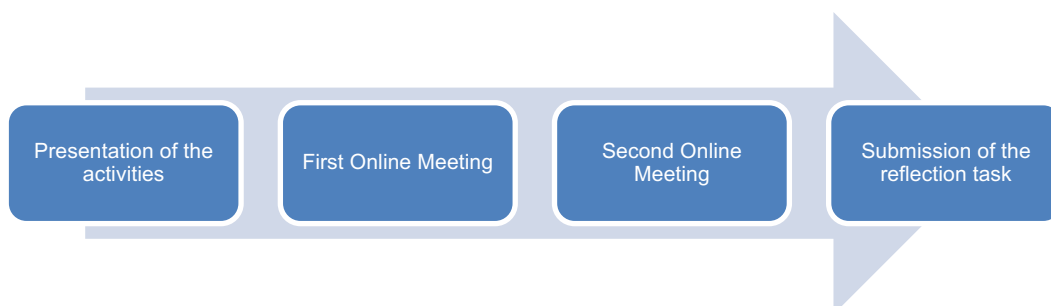
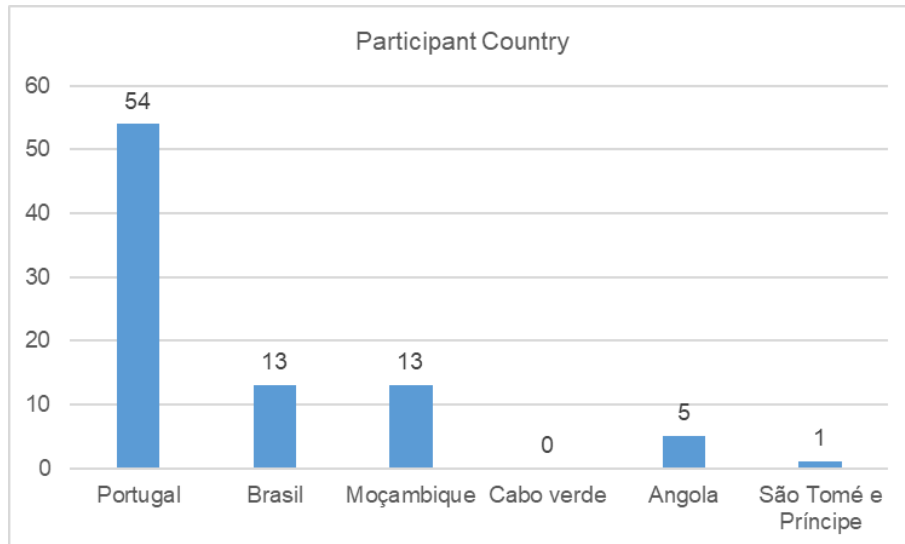


Figure 1. Project implementation

3 RESULTS

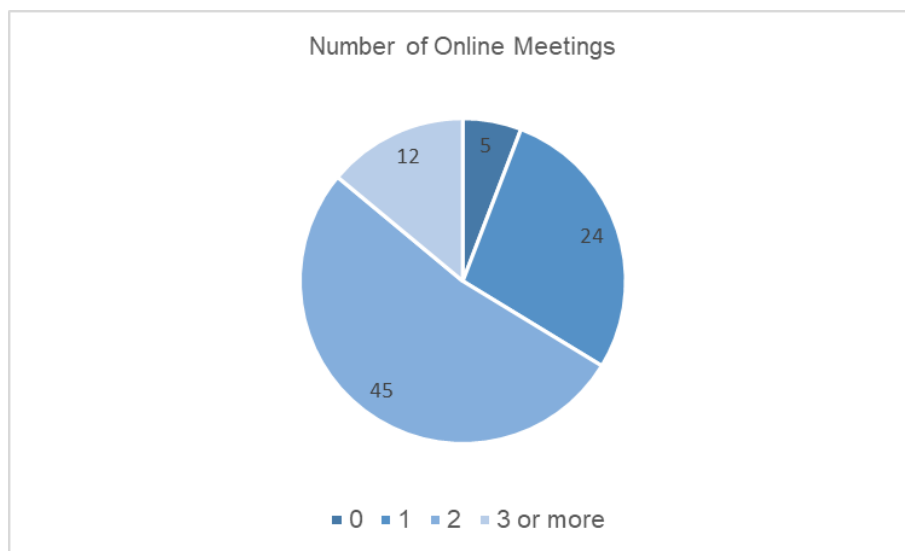
To assess the impact and satisfaction of the students with activity, an online questionnaire (10 questions) was used, with several dimensions (preparation, performance, and overall opinion) where a response rate of 83% was obtained (n=86).

Regarding the participants characteristics, they came from 10 different institutions representing 5 different countries (Graph 1).



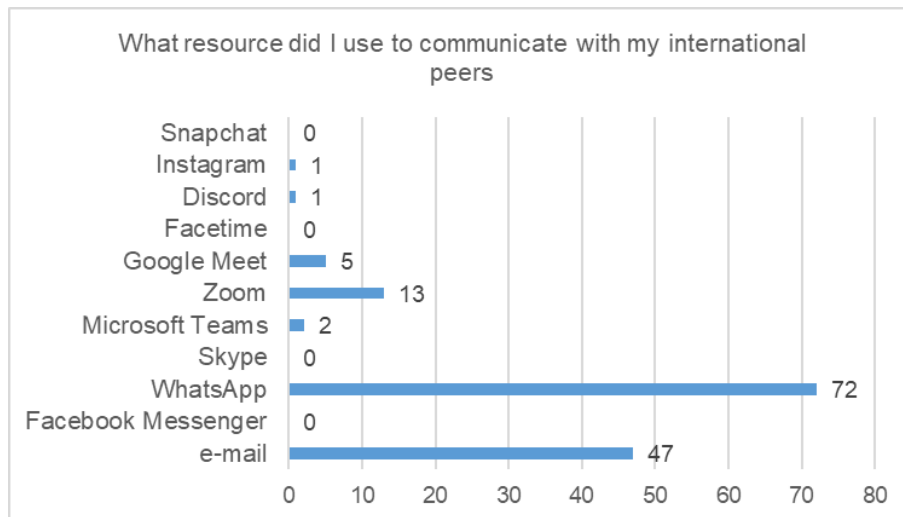
Graphic 1 – Country of Origin

Most of the students did at least 2 online meetings (52%) with some groups meeting 3 or more times (14%) (Graph 2).



Graphic 2 – Number of meetings

In relation to the resources used to communicate with the peer before and during the meetings, most of the students reported the tool WhatsApp (72) and email (47) (Graph 3).



Graphic 3 – Resources

Regarding the activity, 93% considered that the objectives of the activity were clear and attainable and that the support materials were adequate (83%). Regarding meetings with international peers, 70% said that communication was easy during the meetings and that the proposed objectives were achieved (91%). Concerning the impact of the activity, 94% considered that the activity contributes to a better understanding of the international context of teaching and practice of physiotherapists, stressing that it should continue to be carried out within the scope of the physiotherapy course (89%).

4 CONCLUSIONS

The collected feedback from both students and teachers involved in the internationalisation initiative has been generally positive, highlighting the potential benefits of this activity. Moreover, this evaluation has helped pinpoint key areas for enhancement, particularly in relation to student recruitment strategies and the provision of support throughout the entire process. Based on the outcomes, it appears valuable to continue and expand this project, as it exposes students to international contexts and a diverse range of experiences. This exposure to a global environment encourages the development of essential skills and competencies, preparing students to assume more globally oriented roles in their future professional endeavours. By considering the lessons learned and addressing areas for improvement, the project may further impact the educational and professional trajectories of its participants in a meaningful way.

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